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BILLY BLUE-EYES, THE BOY ROVER of the RIO GRANDE. Or, TERROR TOM'S THORNY TRAIL.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "MERLE, THE MIDDY,"
"THE MIDSHIPMAN MUTINEER," "THE FLOATING FEATHER," ETC., ETC., ETC.



WITH THE LAST WORD HE FIRED, AND THE MEXICAN'S HEAD FELL FORWARD, JUST AS THE GREAT MASS OF EARTH, WITH THE TREE, HORSE AND RIDER, WENT DOWN LIKE AN ARROW INTO THE RIO GRANDE.

Billy Blue-Eyes,*

The Boy Rover of the Rio Grande;

OR,

Terror Tom's Thorny Trail.

A Tale of the Texas Border.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL'S BET," "MERLE THE MIDDY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

STRIKING THE WRONG TRAIL.

THE sun was just disappearing beyond the prairie horizon, when a horseman drew rein at a point where the trail he was following branched off into three separate ones.

I said a horseman, and yet he was but a boy, as he could have scarcely seen over sixteen years, though his slender form was well-developed in sinew and muscle, and his face wore the look of one who dared rely wholly upon himself, and had the nerve to face any danger.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings and hunting shirt, wore top-boots, armed with large Mexican spurs, and his jet-black curls, which fell upon his shoulders, were sheltered by a gray sombrero of exceedingly wide brim, and with the left side pinned up with a miniature mustang of solid gold, having a lasso of the same precious metal attached to a pin, as though he was lariat out upon the prairie, while the eyes of the animal were diamonds, and the red nostrils were represented by rubies.

His face, as I have said, was fearless and full of resolution, very handsome in its outline, and stamped with intelligence and thought beyond his years.

But the most striking of all about him were his eyes, for they were large, dreamy in repose, full of fire in excitement, and of a beautiful blue, and very expressive, fringed as they were by long, sweeping black lashes.

The youth was well-armed, for a small breech-loading rifle hung at his back, and he wore a belt of arms that held a revolver upon either hip and a bowie knife in front, ready for a quick grasp.

His accouterments of saddle-bags, blankets, and haversack for provisions, proved that he was prepared for a long trail; while his saddle and bridle were of the Texan pattern and profusely decorated with silver.

The horse he bestrode seemed as fresh as though just led out of a stall; but then he belonged to the class of mustangs that seem untiring.

His hide was black as jet, glossy, and showed that he was well cared for, even on the prairie, while his build indicated speed and endurance of an uncommon order.

"Well, now I am at a loss which trail to take."

"Can you tell me, Jet?" said the youth aloud, and addressing the question to his horse.

"I know that one of these trails leads across the Rio Grande, one into the Indian country, and the other, they say, goes to the haunts of the Pirates of the Chaparrals."

"But which is the one for me to take I do not know."

"Well, Jet, you will have to decide for me, and if you get me into a scrape, why you'll have to get me out of it, as you have many times before."

So saying he turned and rode back a few lengths upon the trail he had come, and then put his horse's head to the westward once more and urged him into a lope.

The animal held on up to where the three trails divided, and then turned unhesitatingly into the left one.

"Well, Jet, you have decided, so here we go," said the youth, and he held on the trail the horse had so unhesitatingly followed.

He had hardly gone a mile before the nature of the country changed greatly, for the rolling prairie gave place to rough lands, with clumps of chaparrals here and there, while, darkness coming on he was forced to go at a slow walk to keep the trail, which at times became very indistinct.

At last, fearing he would lose it altogether, he determined to camp on the bank of a small

rivulet, but at the same time sought a spot some distance from the trail, so that he would not be seen by any one who might pass upon it, though he little expected to meet human beings in that wild part of the country.

He soon found a good spot for a night camp, and dismounting, unsaddled and staked his horse out, after which he settled himself down to eat a frugal supper in darkness and solitude.

This finished, he sunk down upon his blankets and was soon fast asleep.

What awoke him he did not know; but he half sprang to his feet as though he had received some sudden start.

Instantly his eyes fell upon a firelight not half a mile away, blazing cheerily in the chaparrals.

Who could it be he wondered.

This question, after an instant of thought, he determined to solve, so he quietly drew off his boots, and replaced them with a pair of moccasins, which would make his step noiseless.

Then taking his rifle, and drawing his belt of arms up more securely, he set off in the direction of the fire.

After a short walk he came to a water wash, which seemed to lead in the direction of the camp-fire, and dropping into this he continued on his way.

It was some eight feet deep, and round about for some little distance, until, just as he was about to scramble out of it, fearing it would lead him away from the camp, it turned in that direction, and before very long the sound of voices reached his ears.

To his delight, a moment after, the flickering light of the fire was visible, and cutting a resting-place with his knife in the sides of the gully for his feet, he drew himself up and glanced before him over the edge of the bank.

What he saw caused him to start, while he muttered:

"Well! Jet brought me on the wrong trail after all, for this is a camp of the Pirates of the Chaparral."

CHAPTER II.

A BOLD RESOLVE.

FOR full a minute did the youth maintain his position, his eyes glancing over the edge of the bank, and eagerly taking in the whole scene before him.

What he saw was enough to have made many an one less brave at once beat a hasty retreat to his horse, and to then continue his flight from so dangerous a locality.

But the boy seemed not in the least unnerved by his discovery, and coolly took in the situation.

It was a camp in the chaparrals, evidently made for the night only, for two fires had been hastily built, and around them were a score of men engaged in broiling their supper, and each one acting as his own cook.

They were a wild, rough-looking lot, dressed in Mexican attire, though many of them were evidently from the Texas side of the Rio Grande, a few of their number only having the slight form, dark, swarthy face and inky hair of the natives beyond the river.

The boy knew well, by their dress and general appearance, added to their being there in the chaparrals, that they belonged to the band of El Bravo, known as the Chaparral Pirates, and the worst set of cutthroats that infested the Texas border.

Back in the shadow were their horses, and in the foreground, not twenty feet from where the boy stood, was a man, bound to a mesquite tree.

The sympathy of the youth went out at once for the prisoner, and he tried hard to get a look at his face, which fronted toward the firelight.

By dropping back into the gulch, and changing his position, he managed to see the prisoner well.

He was dressed in buckskin, wore a sombrero, and had a face that was bronzed by long exposure, covered with an iron-gray beard, and evidently that of a Texan.

As the boy looked upon the bound man, one of the pirates called out:

"I say, Terror Tom, I guesses yer hain't no appetite, as yer is ter be swung up at sunrise, so don't want nuthin' ter chew on?"

The remark was addressed to the prisoner, and the speaker had advanced a few paces toward him, holding on the end of a stick a piece of broiled buffalo-meat, and in the other hand a tin cup of coffee.

"You is mistook, pirate pard, I allus eats my grub, no matter what ther sitivation might be ag'in' me," was the cool response, and the outlaw, with a light laugh at the man's pluck, came forward and handed him the meat and

coffee, which he grasped with difficulty, as his wrists were tightly bound together.

"Terror Tom!" said the youth, when he heard the name of the prisoner called by the outlaw.

"Terror Tom! why he is one of the most noted bordermen in Texas, and they do say that he never spares a Chaparral Pirate, and has a fearful debt of revenge to settle with their chief, El Bravo."

"How could he have fallen into their hands, I wonder?"

"Anyhow they have him, sure, and he is to die at sunrise, that fellow said, so I'll see if I cannot rescue him."

"It's a bold thing to attempt; but I'll try it on at any rate," and the youth at once dropped back into the gulch and returned to his own camp, to prepare for the desperate work on hand.

CHAPTER III.

A RESCUE AND A CAPTURE.

UPON returning to his solitary and fireless camp the youth at once got all ready for a start, and then led his horse to a tree near the water-wash and fastened him, at the same time muffling him to prevent his neighing should the animal grow lonesome or scent those of the pirates.

Then he retraced his way to the spot where he had been nearest to the prisoner, and once more took an observation.

The outlaws had finished their supper and wrapped themselves in their serapes to sleep, having stationed a guard over the horses. But the prisoner, who had been addressed as Terror Tom, was still munching the steak given him, and to attract his attention was the first thing to be done.

To do this without rousing the pirates was a most perilous undertaking, but the youth seemed to have already decided upon what he should do, for he took from his pocket a coil of string and fastened to it his knife, which he then skillfully threw at the tree to which the prisoner was bound.

The point stuck fast not a foot from the captive's head, causing him to start and glance around quickly.

The firelight glimmered upon the bright blade and at once caught his eye, as did also the string attached, which told him the weapon had not been aimed at him.

As he looked toward the water-wash his keen eyes detected the moving head, and he seemed to understand that he had a friend near, though who that friend could be he had not the remotest idea.

Shaking his head, and then pointing as well as his bound hands would permit toward the sleeping outlaws not twenty feet away, he again turned his gaze upon the gloom behind him, in an endeavor to discover who it could be that wished to serve him.

Then he took in the situation in his front by letting his gaze fall upon each one of the outlaws, to see if there was the slightest sign that any of them was awake.

Ere he had completed this observation in spite of his nerve he started as he felt a touch upon his arm.

He dared not move, and a hand passed under his arm, a blade was thrust between his hands and held firmly, and by simply pressing the thongs hard upon it and rubbing them to and fro they were removed.

The blade was then left in his hand, and with it he cut the thongs from his feet, and the lariat that bound his body to the tree having been also severed, he knew that he was a free man.

Then he turned half round and viewed the bold rescuer.

He saw a form lying at full length upon the ground behind the tree, and a beardless, boyish face looked into his own, and from the lips came a low whisper:

"Come, for my horse is tied down the gulch, and he can carry us both far from here before dawn."

"Waal, you is a cool one, lad, an' has got ther narve o' a Comanche. Who is yer thet risks yer life ter save that o' old Terror Tom?" said the man.

"Never mind who I am, but come," was the whispered reply, and the youth began to crawl slowly back toward the gulch, still lying flat upon the ground.

Terror Tom also lay down upon his face, and like a snake moved himself in the direction of the water-wash, and at a point some paces below the spot from whence the youth had ventured forth.

But hardly had the distance been half traversed, when a form suddenly emerged from the chaparral into the firelight, a loud shout of

* A name given to W. A. Powell, M. D., who wears also the appellations of "Bronco Billy" and the "Saddle King." While following a mysterious trail in Texas and Mexico, he won the above title of "Billy Blue-Eyes."—THE AUTHOR.

alarm was given, and a lasso was sent whirling through the air.

It was the guard over the horses, who from some distance off had seen the movements about the tree, for the firelight shone full upon them, and had come to the camp to see what it meant.

At his wild note of warning, both Terror Tom and the youth, knowing they were discovered, sprang to their feet and bounded toward the gulch.

But ere the boy could reach it the guard's lasso settled over his head and shoulders, and he was jerked upon his back, just as Terror Tom reached the bank of the water-wash and jumped down, while a volley of revolvers sent bullets flying over his head.

Though the lasso was drawn so tight as to pinion his arms to his sides, the boy yet managed to fire his revolver, which he carried in his hand, and drop one of the outlaws, as half-a-dozen rushed upon him.

But he was seized, quickly bound, and dragged near the fire, while half-a-score of men started in pursuit of the escaped captive.

Suddenly a loud shout was heard down the water-wash, and all listened, while there came on the night winds the ringing words:

"Don't fear, my boy, for old Terror Tom is free!"

A yell broke from the outlaws, and one of them asked savagely, as the sound of hoofs falling rapidly, died away in the distance:

"Well, who are you that has dared to set free our worst foe?"

"I'm only a boy," was the quiet response.

"That a blind man can see, but you have a man's pluck, and I want to know your name?"

"Oh, if it will do you any good I don't mind telling you that I am called Billy Blue-Eyes."

Exclamations of surprise were heard upon all sides at this rejoinder, which made it evident that all present had before heard of the daring youth.

CHAPTER IV.

BILLY BLUE EYES.

"BLUE-EYED BILLY you say your name is?" said the man, who was evidently the leader of the outlaws, and he gazed into the handsome, fearless face of the boy, as he stood before him, bound securely with a lariat.

"So I am called, both that and Billy Blue-Eyes," was the calm response.

"Have you not another handle?"

"Yes, they call me the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande."

"That's so, and I guess you deserve it, for they say you know each shore as well as your own face."

"I know them pretty well below here, but have seldom been up this far."

"It's unlucky you got this far up the river now, for I guess your days are numbered."

"I have but one time to die, and when that time comes will meet it bravely," was the bold rejoinder.

Just then, as the man was about to make response, up dashed the men who had gone off in chase of Terror Tom.

"C'u'dn't catch him, Loot'nent Hal," said one.

"He was on foot and you mounted, and you should have done so," said the leader, who had been addressed as Lieutenant Hal, and who was an evil-faced young man, with the appearance of one who had seen better days.

"No sir, he were on a horse that moved like a streak o' grand lightning, an' thet our animiles had no biz with I kin tell yer."

"You had a horse in the chaparral?" asked the outlaw officer, turning to Blue-Eyed Billy.

"I had."

"What was the prisoner to you?"

"Nothing more than that he was a prisoner to the Pirates of the Chaparrals."

"Hal! you know us then?"

"Yes."

"Well, you will be sorry of the acquaintance, for you have set a man free whom I have been one month striving to capture, and for whom the captain—"

"El Bravo?" asked the boy.

"Yes, Captain El Bravo, and he offered five thousand pesos for the head of Terror Tom, who, for years has hung upon the trail of his men untiringly, and taken off a number of his best boys."

"Well, he's free now."

"Yes, and you are in his place, and my word for it, youngster, when El Bravo meets us here at sunrise, as he is to do, you'll go up to yonder tree, for the captain has another little debt to settle with you, if I don't mistake."

"Yes, I thwarted him once down the river, when he was intending a raid upon the ranches, and the Rangers gave him a fearful thrashing," boldly said the boy.

"I have heard the captain speak of how you were concealed in a *hacienda* one night and listened to his plot to raid the ranches, and he has often wanted to catch you, and now I've got you, he won't scold me for letting Terror Tom get away."

"But come, I'll tie you so you won't escape this night, and then we'll take some rest, for we need it."

And Blue-Eyed Billy was placed between two of the outlaws for safe keeping, and bound so securely that he suffered; but determined not to show that he cared, he dropped back on the serape spread for him, and soon appeared to fast asleep.

CHAPTER V.

EL BRAVO.

WITH the coming of dawn the Pirates of the Chaparrals were astir, and their young prisoner was relieved in a measure from his sufferings, as his bonds were made loose.

But he had uttered no complaint, and his daring rescue of Terror Tom, and silence under suffering, with the air of indifference he wore, won the admiration of his captors.

"I sent a courier to the captain, my lad, to meet me here, and he'll be along before long, and I tell you frankly, I guess you'll hang," said the outlaw officer.

Billy Blue-Eyes made no reply, and the outlaw continued:

"You see you shot Whisky Dick last night."

"He attacked me."

"True, but you were in our camp, and the chief is not a man to be merciful; but I want you to hear me."

"Well."

"I'm your friend."

The boy shook his head dubiously, and the man went on:

"They say that you know where there is a gold-mine in the mountains."

"Do they say so?"

"Yes, they say you do; and I'll make terms with you."

"What kind of terms?"

"You tell me where the mine is, or go there with me as guide, and I'll manage it so that you can escape."

"I will not."

"Your gold won't do you any good if El Bravo hangs you."

"Nor would it if I trusted myself to you."

"You don't doubt me, do you, boy?"

"Certainly."

"But I wish to serve you."

"You wish to use me as a tool to serve yourself."

"Well, here comes the captain, and I guess before he's done with you you'll be glad to have my friendship; and you can get it on the terms I name."

Billy Blue-Eyes laughed lightly, and turned his gaze upon a man who just then rode up, followed at a short distance by some thirty horsemen, all well armed and mounted, and wearing the same style of dress as his captors, which was a commingling of the Texas borderman and Mexican *caballero*.

The horseman in advance was attired with real elegance. His spurs were of gold, a cord of silver bullion encircled his hat, a broad-brimmed sombrero, richly embroidered with various devices, and his revolvers and bowie were gold-mounted, while he carried no rifle, as did his men.

His horse was a snow-white stallion, long-limbed, gaunt-bodied, and with an arched neck and small head, and his saddle and bridle, of the Mexican make, were worth a small fortune, so richly were they trimmed with both gold and silver.

The form of the man was slender, of ordinary height, and graceful, but his face was not to be seen, for it was shielded wholly from view by a crimson mask, and his hands were covered with gauntlet gloves he was never seen to remove, so that not even his men could tell whether he was a white man or an Indian, for his hair was jet-black and worn long, and might belong to the head of a Comanche as well as a pale-face.

Such was El Bravo, the chief of the Pirates of the Chaparrals, who rode up and dismounted in front of where sat Billy Blue-Eyes, securely bound, and said sternly, but with an accent as though English was not his native tongue:

"Senor Hal, who have you there?—for that is certainly not the American scout, Terror Tom."

"No, captain; this youth is the rescuer of Terror Tom."

"Hal! the scout escaped?" savagely cried the chief.

"Yes, captain. He was rescued by this youth, whom we captured."

"And who are you, sir, that dares come into my camp and release a prisoner?" and El Bravo turned upon the youth, who coolly answered:

"I am one, El Bravo, who has thwarted several of your little games of devilry on the lower Rio Grande."

"*Santissima!* You are the boy known as Billy Blue-Eyes, the Rover of the Rio Grande?"

"I am!"

"The saints be praised! Why, boy, I would rather have you in my power than a thousand Terror Toms, for I have sought for you seven long years, and at last I have you." And the laugh of demoniacal joy the chief gave vent to fairly made the boy, brave as he was, shiver with dread.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANDIT BUGLER.

ALL of the Chaparral Pirates, without an exception, believed that their chief intended to at once string the brave boy up to the large mesquite tree near by; but, instead, he ordered that he should simply be ironed instead of bound, saying:

"I have more faith in iron, Lieutenant Hal, than in horsehair and hemp, and later on will be time enough for the latter."

The last part of his sentence was said in sinister tone that was most significant of trouble to come for Billy Blue-Eyes.

The boy was given a breakfast with the men, and ate heartily of it, while the chief, as was his wont, sat apart at his meal, his face turned away from the band while he partook of his food, that none might see what lay beneath that red mask.

After breakfast El Bravo at once ordered his lieutenant and ten men to start upon the trail of Terror Tom and to keep up the hunt until he was captured, adding:

"Then come to the Hacienda, for you are to take command while I go upon my vacation."

"Si, Senor El Bravo, I will return in time and, I hope, bring with me our foe, Terror Tom."

"I sincerely hope so, Senor Hal, for with that man off our trail, we can work to far better advantage than we have done."

"Now order the bugler to sound 'Boots and saddles.'"

The order was given and a mere youth, whom Billy Blue-Eyes had not before noticed, came forward, took a silver bugle from where it hung upon a mesquite tree, and blew a few clear notes in a manner that proved he was no amateur with the instrument.

Gazing upon him with some interest, Billy Blue-Eyes saw that his form was slender and graceful, his hands and feet small, and that he was dressed with an elegance equal to that of the chief, and armed with weapons of the finest and latest pattern.

His hair was short and curly, a rich red, the same hue of his mustache, although his face was very dark, and his eyes were jet-black, large, and seemed full of thought of a painful nature.

He was very handsome, certainly, and all said he was the pet of the chief, if El Bravo's heart could be forced to acknowledge a feeling for any one other than himself, that was not born in selfishness or hate.

With the notes of the bugle the men sprang to their feet, threw the saddles upon their horses, and soon after the two parties rode away, the lieutenant and his half-score of men going down the gulch to strike the trail left by Terror Tom, and the chief with his followers penetrating deeper into the chaparrals and holding in a direction that must bring them to the Rio Grande.

With this latter party went Billy Blue-Eyes, his hands ironed and bound to his saddle-horn, and by his side rode Bonita, the Bandit Bugler, as the outlaw youth was known to his companions.

CHAPTER VII.

TERROR TOM.

THE man whom Billy Blue Eyes had so daringly rescued, at his own cost, was half tempted to turn about and fight his foes, when he saw the youth lassoed, and half hesitated for that purpose.

But he was a man who had been in deadly peril of his life for years, and thought quickly and with reason at the most critical moment,

and he saw that such a course would be madness, and he darted away like the wind.

He was unarmed, yet Billy Blue-Eyes had given him a hint that he had a horse near by, and toward this he went, springing out of the gulch to endeavor to find the animal.

This he soon did, and throwing himself into the saddle he darted away like the wind, dropping his pursuers rapidly, for they dashed up as he rode off.

"Waal, this heur animile are a goer, an' no mistake, and he do go as though he c'u'd keep it up all night.

"And I hes arms, heur, a rifle, I hes, and a belt with a revolver an' knife hangin' to ther horn.

"Terror Tom, you is fixed, but he are in a bad way.

"But who are he?

"Thet question I gits no answer to; but he are a bold man, and a boy, and I hain't ther gerloot ter desart him in trouble, tho' I do hev ter make tracks now fer a livin'," and Terror Tom muttered to himself as he rode along.

Seeing that his pursuers gave up the chase he at once halted, and then making a circuit, headed in a direction that would bring him again into the vicinity of the camp.

At last he drew rein quickly and said:

"I hes a idee, and it must be ther truth.

"Thar hes been a youngster beatin' about ther lower Rio Grande, on both ther Mexikin an' Texin side, and they calls him Billy Blue-Eyes, an' ther Boy Rover, for ther scouts say he do be lookin' like he were s'archin' fer suthin' he has lost.

"He were thar on the lower river fer a couple o' year, an' guv no satisfaction ter nobody as ter what he were about, an' c'u'd handle hisself in a way that were dangerous, ef any inquiz folks went ter find out his biz.

"I has heerd he hes lately crossed up ter this vicin' an' ef I do not mistook he are ther chap ther Chaparral Pirts hes got, and who was prowlin' round, seen me in trouble an' jist chipped in ter help me out.

"Waal, I got out, an' he are in, so I'll jist chip in an' help him out, an' then, afore I follers ther trail o' El Bravo an' his gang no longer, I'll jist go an' put a bullet inter this man I thort were my friend, an' who got me cotched by ther Chaparrals, an' got his dust fer betrayin' me.

"Thet are a sacred duty I hes ter perform, arter which I are free ter continue on ther trail o' El Bravo.

"But first, it are my prayin' obligation ter git ther boy out o' ther power o' ther Chaparrals, an' ef I don't do it, then my name goes fer nothin' as Terror Tom."

Having made up his mind as to his course, Terror Tom concealed the magnificent horse he rode in a chaparral, and started on foot for the camp of the outlaws.

He was a perfect plainsman, and crept with the noiseless motion of a snake up to within ear-shot of the camp-fire, and saw Billy Blue-Eyes among his foes.

"Ther boy hes got ther grit o' a Mexikin lion, and don't skeer fer nothin'," he muttered.

For a long time he kept his position, and then going back to his horse, threw himself down to sleep, fully aware that he had the power to wake up just at dawn.*

Promptly, with the first gray of coming day, Terror Tom awoke, partook of a meal from Billy Blue-Ey's haversack of provisions, and then mounting, approached the camp of the Pirates as carefully as was possible.

At last he came in sight of the encampment, and, concealed in the dense chaparrals, beheld the coming of El Bravo and his men, and afterward the band divide into parties.

"Ther boy goes with ther chief, an' thet air my direcshun o' travelin', I air thinkin'," he muttered; and off he went on the trail of El Bravo, while Lieutenant Hal and his men were on the search for him.

CHAPTER VIII.

TERROR TOM'S "PERQUISITES."

TERROR TOM was, as I have said, a thorough plainsman, and he knew the Rio Grande country on both the Mexican and Texan sides for leagues inland, from Matamoras to El Paso.

He had, therefore, followed upon the trail of El Bravo but a short distance when he suddenly drew rein to think, for he did not feel equal to

* Many of the men of the border are so disciplined by the lives they lead that they awaken at any time they set their minds upon before going to sleep. I know that, upon the prairie and at sea, I have been able to do the same, after a little practice.

—THE AUTHOR.

the task of deciding what was best to be done while he was moving along.

"I guesses I smells a mice," he said, emphatically, as he brought Jet to a sudden halt.

"Thet loot'nent," he continued, "were sent out jist ter cotch me, and he did it prime, I admits; an' I hes a debt ter settle with my friend Sanchez, who betrayed me."

"Waal, as ther Bravo goes back towards his retreat in the Mexikin hills, ther loot'nent must hev a leetle biz ter perform, an' I guesses I air ther object o' it, fer he w'u'dn't strike out with only ten men on a raid on the ranches.

"So, says I, I must look durned sharp, or I'll hev somebody creepin' up on my rear, while I air all attenshun in front.

"So, says I, I'll jist sarcumvent ther devils, an' find out jist what is ther leetle game."

Having come to this decision, Terror Tom rode on at a gallop, until at last the trail crossed a small stream.

Into this he at once turned, following its downward course instead of continuing on after El Bravo.

About a mile he kept in the water-course, and then sought dry land, and heading due west, wen off at a gallop, which the noble black did not seem to object to in the least.

Until in the afternoon he held this course, and then turned due north, and kept on at the same swinging pace until he struck a line of hills near the Rio Grande.

Here he came upon a well-defined trail, and eagerly he glanced at it while he said:

"They hasn't gone by yet, an' I'll jist hunt cover an' see ther cirkiss."

He soon found a secure retreat for his horse, and where he could feed while he rested, and betook himself to a point on a high hill which was covered with a growth of small bushes and thorns.

Unheeding the latter, he hid himself securely and waited for developments.

He had been there perhaps for half an hour when there came in sight a body of horsemen, some forty in number.

"Thar they comes, an' El Bravo is at ther head, as he allus rides.

"An' thar is ther boy as helped me, ter git cotched hisself, an' they hes him tied ter ther saddle o' a led horse.

"He slayed one o' them gang afore he was tuk, an' I guesses they hes presented him with ther horse o' ther dead man.

"Waal, ther boy hes grit, fer he rides same as ef he were ther chief o' ther gang.

"And that young Bandit Boogler am ridin' by his side.

"Now, he are a queer one, an' kin toot thet silver horn fer all thar is in it.

"I hev tried ter capture thet young Boogler, but it hain't been in me ter do it, an' somehow when I hes hed ther chance ter put a bullet inter him I kinder wilts, same as tho' it wa'n't a squar' deal ter shoot him.

"I c'u'd jist knock El Bravo over now with this heur fine shootin'-iron o' ther lad's; but thet hain't ther way I wants him ter die, an' I spar's him jist ter see him pass in his chips to my way o' thinkin'; and it shell be yet, fer I hesn't foller'd his trail these five years fer nuthin'.

"Waal, thar they goes out o' sight, an' now ter see ef I are right about ther loot'nent bein' on my trail.

"If so I is, then I'll jist give 'em a hint thet Terror Tom are trailin', while he are bein' trailed."

The old prairie man then settled himself into an easy position to wait, and as patiently as a cat would watch for a mouse he remained at his post, for time seemed nothing to him.

Perhaps two hours had passed since El Bravo and his men had gone by, when the quick ear of Terror Tom detected a sound that told him was made by hoof-falls.

Instantly he swung his rifle, or rather the one that belonged to Billy Blue-Eyes, round for use, examined it closely, and kept his eye upon the chaparral out of which he expected to see horsemen emerge.

Presently there came in sight a body of mustangs and riders that brought a low whistle from Terror Tom, for his eyes did not fall upon what he had expected to see.

"Injuns!" he said in a low tone.

"Comanches! and they is follerin' ther trail o' El Bravo.

"It are old Oak Heart's band, and he are the only Injun as is reg'larly down on El Bravo, an' he hes reason, as the Chaparral Pirts tuk ther booty he hed got at ther settlemts from him some half year ago, an' he swore ter scalp ther outlaw chief, an' seems as ef he were on ther way ter keep his word.

"Le'm' see! thar's four, eight, sixteen, thirty; yes, nigh eighty Injuns, an' they is hot on ther trail, an' soon as my friend ther loot'nent comes along I'll put sail on, too, an' be in at ther cirkiss, for it will be a case o' Kilkenny cats atween 'em."

Again Terror Tom, confident that his suspicions were right regarding the squad of Lieutenant Hal being on his trail, settled down patiently to await events.

He had this time not very long to wait before there came to his ear the sound of hoofs, and a grim smile of satisfaction passed over his face, while he muttered:

"I know'd it, an' I hes led yer a lively dance this day, Loot'nent Pirit, or I are a prevaricat-in' liar.

"Yas, thar you is, an' yer looks bothered, fer yer don't onderstand ther big trail over ther chief's.

"Yer is a good trailer fer sartin', an' hes follered me prime, an' yer knows my idee is ter keep ther boy in sight, an' yer hopes ter catch me in atween yer gang an' ther cap'n's; but I'll jist settle yer on'y life right heur, ef ther lad's rifle shoots whar it are p'inted."

As he said the last words he brought the rifle slowly up to his shoulder, and his aim was at the outlaw officer, who, with his men, was riding slowly along, closely examining the trail before them.

As the outlaw drew within range there came the sharp crack of the rifle, and the horse of the hit rider bounded forward, while his master fell dead in the trail.

The horrified followers of the slain man quickly drew rein and glanced around in search of the one who had fired the shot, and almost at once their eyes fell upon the little puff of smoke drifting away from the hillside.

"Ther weepin' are a prime shooter, an' no mistake, an' I has put a new name on my red list, an' I'll jist see ef I can't git another."

As Terror Tom spoke he checked his intended flight, threw in another cartridge, and once more the rifle went up to his shoulder.

With its ringing report there fell a man from his horse, and the others, in wild alarm, scattered from the trail and rode off across the valley at full speed.

"He! he! he! ha! ha! ha! ho! ho! ho!" laughed Terror Tom, as he sprung to his feet.

"I was jist goin' ter cl'ar out meself an' make fer my animile, or leastwise ther boy's animile; but they save me ther run by goin' themselves.

"Waal, I'll let 'em see who I are, so they kin jist tell ther chief, Terror Thomas hain't dead yit."

Waving his sombrero about his head, Terror Tom gave a wild yell, and looking back the frightened bandits could not but see that they were flying from one man.

But they did not halt, and making a circuit, headed once more for the trail, anxious to re-join their chief and tell him that they had been attacked by a large force and their officer and one man slain.

"Waal, they skips lively, an' they leaves me ther field an' ther perkisits, so I'll jist gather 'em in," and so saying Terror Tom went back for Jet, mounted him and rode down into the valley.

The two men were lying where they had fallen, and by the side of the outlaw officer stood his horse, a very fine animal, as though waiting for him to rise.

"He hain't goin' ter git up, old horse, so I'll jist take yer in, an' yer comrade too, which are feeding yonder," and Terror Tom nodded to the animal of the slain bandit that was enjoying a pull at the grass in the valley, unmindful of his master's death.

"Two horses, two saddles, two bridles, some weepins, an' two dead men thet may hev a leetle suthin' about ther clothes worthy o' my attention," muttered the plainsman as he bent over the dead bodies and searched them.

"A bottle o' tanglehoof, which are good fer make bites.

"A pack o' keerds calt ther gambler's Bible.

"Yas, a leetle gold dust, an' some jewelry as me gal hes been robbed of, an' I hes my perkisits.

"Now I guesses I jist foller on arter ther favo ter see ther fun; but not bein' a durned fool, I'll not stick ter this trail an' git slugged from a ambush, but go my own way," and having collected his "perquisits," Terror Tom once more set out on the trail of the Pirates of the Chaparral.

CHAPTER IX.

EL BRAVO'S STRATEGY.

It might have been a bad affair for El Bravo and his men, had not his lieutenant been killed

by Terror Tom, for he had insisted upon believing the extra hoof-tracks upon the trail were made by some small party of the main band going to the retreat with stolen stock, and hooted the idea that Indians might be following the chief.

"No Indians care to war with us, except Oak Heart, and he dare not," Lieutenant Hal had said.

But when Terror Tom had so suddenly dropped the officer, a minute before laughing at danger, and then brought down one of his men, the others had taken to flight, fearing an ambush.

Once off the trail, they determined not to return to it, and convinced that danger menaced their chief, they rode on at the full speed of their horses to overtake him at a certain point, at the same time swerving afar off so as to avoid whatever might be following El Bravo.

By pressing their animals cruelly, they reached the trail at a point some fifteen miles from where they had left it, and were rejoiced to see that El Bravo had not passed.

At that moment almost, he came in sight, and they dashed forward to meet him and their story was soon told, but by no means a truthful one.

"It was Terror Tom, you are certain, who shot the lieutenant and Kidford?" sternly asked the chief.

"It was, captain, for we seen him, an' there was a large force with him, and they is now follerin' on your trail, an' thinks they druv us back, fer we went on ther back trail fer a leetle way, an' then come on by ther Mesquite valley, an' you kin see by our critters how we hes rid," said one of the men, and to his lie the others nodded assent.

"Well, it is sunset now, and my camp was to be at the crossing, so you men go on there, as your horses have been driven so hard, while I camp in yonder chaparral to see who it is that this Terror Tom is leading so boldly upon my trail.

"Here, take this prisoner with you, and on your lives let him not escape."

The men who had been with the outlaw lieutenant at once placed themselves around Billy Blue-Eyes and rode on, the chief calling to them to make half-a-dozen camp-fires, and keep moving to and fro before them, for the intended camping-ground could be seen from where they then were.

As they moved off El Bravo ordered his men to take their horses back into the chaparral, and then come to the edge of the woods to lie in ambush for the foes upon their trail.

This order was promptly obeyed, and hardly had darkness settled down when up flashed the fires far away, and the men crouched down in silence, their weapons ready, to meet the expected surprise with a surprise.

CHAPTER X.

THE AMBUSH.

TERROR TOM, in his circuit from the trail, fearing an ambush, had come upon the tracks of the nine outlaws, and he saw at once their little game was to head their chief off at a given point.

Knowing the country as he did, he knew pretty well about where they expected to catch the band, and he at once set out upon a rapid gallop.

Jet led the pace well, and both of the other animals being fine travelers, and with no riders, they readily kept up, and Terror Tom came to a rise that gave him a view of the trail, just as those he followed reached it, and were joined by El Bravo and his band.

In the gathering gloom he watched the meeting, beheld the short and evidently earnest conversation, and then beheld the result.

"Waal, waal, that Bravo are a sharp 'un, an' no mistake, fer he hev laid a neat leetle plot ter fist tackle old Oak Heart fer all he are worth."

"Waal, I'll jist go on ter camp, an' while they fights it out, see ef I can't do suthin' fer ther boy."

So saying, Terror Tom rode on to a spot as near the outlaw camp-fires as he dared go.

Then he dismounted and looked to the comfort of his horses, after which he went on a reconnaissance on foot.

The brightly-blazing camp-fires, with the half-score bandits walking to and fro before them, gave the appearance of quite a number of men; but Terror Tom was not deceived by this, and crept nearer and nearer, until he at last discovered Billy Blue Eyes.

"Thar are ther boy, an' they hes him tied to a tree."

"But I'm guessin' I kin do suthin' when ther

rackit begins yonder, so I'll jist wait right heur."

Without more ado the prairie man sunk to sleep, his head resting upon his arm, for he was worn out with loss of rest and hard work the past few days.

He knew that when the trap was sprung upon the Indians by El Bravo, the first shot would awake him, and this would be the time for him to act.

He had slept about an hour, when suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by a terrific volley of firearms, followed by wild yells and shouts, the neighing and tramping of horses and every sound to indicate that the old Indian chief had ridden boldly into the ambush, deceived by the distant camp-fires.

"Now I is ter spring my trap," muttered Terror Tom, and at once he moved toward the timber in which was the outlaw camp.

At the volley they at once congregated toward the edge of the timber nearest the scene of the fight, and were repaid for their tramping vigils about the camp-fire with the thought that the Indians must have suffered fearfully.

Seeing that the bandits, in their deep interest, did just what he had anticipated they would do, Terror Tom lost no time in reaching the timber, as they had seemed to forget, almost, the existence of the prisoner, and had left him tied to the tree sixty feet from where they stood.

Like a shadow he glided among the trees, and reached the one to which Billy Blue-Eyes was bound, and who was also glancing in the direction of the firing, which, after the first volley had been kept up in a scattering way, the flashes of the rifles and revolvers being distinctly seen in the edge of the distant chaparral.

"I say, young pard, I guesses you mout as well dust out o' this."

Billy Blue-Eyes started as the words fell upon his ears, and by one who was not two feet from him.

Turning quickly, he saw the form of the prairie man keeping in the shadow of the tree, for there was a fire not three yards away, and at the same time using his knife upon the thongs that bound him to the trunk.

"What! you here?" he cried, and his face flushed with joy.

"I are, fer a tarn about are fa'r an' squar', leetle pard."

"Thar! yer is free."

"Not quite, for I have manacles upon my wrists; but I am free to move away from here, and if you lead on I'll follow," said the youth.

"Pard, I are ther one ter protect ther rear, fer I hes no irons on my wrists, but in my hands, an' I kalkilates ter use 'em ef thar be need."

"Strike yonder way, an' keep goin', an' I'll tell yer when ter tarn."

Billy Blue-Eyes quickly slipped around in the shadow of the tree, and then moved away rapidly in the darkness, followed by Terror Tom.

It took them but a moment to get out of all glare of the firelight, and then, leaving the timber, they went at a run for the horses.

The animals were found just as Terror Tom had left them, and he said:

"Thar, pard, are your horse, an' be are lightnin' an' steam fer goin' an' keep goin'."

"I thanks yer fer ther use o' him, an' myself freezes ter this animile, which b'longed ter ther loot'ent, an' his weepins is good enough fer me, too, while we hes a spar' horse atween us."

"Now we'll get out o' this whichever way you says, fer things hain't solively in ther chaparral yonder as they were, an' I guesses we mout git inter a muss ef we stayed right heur."

"I owe you my life, sir, and I have no right to keep you here in danger; but my trail was toward the retreat of El Bravo," said the youth.

"Yas, be were takin' yer thar, an'—"

"No, I was going to the retreat of the outlaws to see if I could find one for whom I have been searching for two years, and I am not to be turned from the trail of El Bravo and his band, as I owe them a debt of revenge I have sworn to repay."

"Pard, put yer fist in mine, for it are my biz ter hang on ther trail, an' we'll be pards in ther rackit."

"But now, let us git across ther river and find a place whar we kin chin over ther best thing ter be did," and the two mounted and rode away in the direction of the Rio Grande, Billy Blue-Eyes delighted at being once more upon the back of his noble horse, even though his hands were yet in irons.

CHAPTER XI.

A COMPACT.

At a rapid pace Terror Tom, leading the extra horse, and with Billy Blue Eyes following, rode

away from the vicinity of the outlaws and the defeated Indians, for it was evident that the red-skins had been driven back, as the firing went from the camp of the Chaparral Pirates instead of toward it.

Arriving at the ford of the Rio Grande, toward which El Bravo had been making his way* the two horsemen, so strangely met, crossed over to the Mexican side without any adventure, and Terror Tom at once turned the head of his horse toward a place where he said they would be perfectly safe.

"It are a hidin'-place I hes used afore, pard, an' it hev done me good service," he explained.

The nature of the ground was such that their horses here left no trail, and turning into a deep water-wash they kept up it for a long distance, to at last come out in a chaparral that seemed impenetrable at the first glance.

But Terror Tom unhesitatingly pushed on into the darkness, and Billy Blue-Eyes followed until they came suddenly upon an old hacienda,

"Pard, it were occupied long ago, by a priest, who were kilt fer his money, folks said."

"He hed sin' half home, half chu'ch, an' beaur his he were kilt, ther place hev not only gone ter ruin, but ther chaparral hev grow'd up 'round it so thet ther way up the water-wash are ther only way it kin be reached."

"So here we is, with good shelter, water and grass fer ther critters, an' we'll be safe, as yer can't git a Mexikin, Injun, peon or priest any whar near it."

"Git down, an' when I hev struck a lucifer an' made some fire-light I'll jist try my hand on gittin' them irons off fer yer."

The old hacienda had evidently been built over a century before, and was an adobe structure, large and rambling, having been used for both domicile and chapel.

Terror Tom soon had a fire burning in one wing of it, and utterly helpless, ironed as he was, Billy Blue-Eyes entered and sat down upon a pile of fagots.

The prairie man bustled about, getting the horses staked out, bringing the saddles into the house and making all as comfortable as he could, after which he broiled some *tasajo*† on the coals and put on a pot of coffee, the delicious aroma of which made both of the inhalers hungry.

After the meal was over, Billy Blue-Eyes eating as well as he could with his manacled hands, Terror Tom set to work to try to relieve his young friend of the torturing irons.

But every effort to pick the lock or break them, was a signal failure, and the prairie man said dismally:

"Waal, leetle pard, there are but one thing thet kin be did."

"What is that, Terror Tom?"

"I kin go to ther *jacal*‡ of a Mexican pard I know that lives some three leagues from heur, an' pit from him a file."

"But the risk is great for you to run."

"Ther risk are great, but bein' alive are a great risk too, as thar is plenty wants ter call in my chips."

"But I kin speak ther Mexican lingo prime, an' tain't likely I'll meet any gerloot, so I'll start ter-morrer night, soon as it am dark, an' I kin git back afore dawn."

"I hate to see you take such chances as to ride inland in this strange country; but then I am worse than a cripple in this fix."

"You is; but I'll go ter-morrer night, as it are best ter give ther critters ter-night an' ter-morrer ter rest."

"Now, bein' as we is ter be pards, I'd like ter know ef yer handle hain't Blue-Eyed Billy!"

"Yes, I am so called."

"Waal, I thought so, an' I likes yer, an' it were han'some o' yer ter light right in ter git me out o' ther clutch o' ther Pirits."

"Oh! I saw their camp-fires from where I was stopping and reconnoitering beheld you, and heard your name called—"

"Terror Tom, the Trailer?"

"Yes."

"Waal, that are what they calls me, an' I guesses as how I is a terrer ter ther Chaparral Pirits; but then, Billy, I hes hed cause," and the old man nearly choked up with emotion, while Billy Blue-Eyes said:

"I have heard that you trailed El Bravo and his band for revenge."

"I do, boy," almost fiercely said Terror Tom.

"I do, and I shall continue on their trail, for

* The Rio Grande is not fordable except at certain points, on account of its precipitous banks and quicksands.

† Dried beef

‡ House.

they came one night, years ago to my humble home, an' they kilt my wife, an' carried off my boy an' girl, while they robbed me of all I hed in the world, the savings of a lifetime, an' left me, as they believed, dead.

"But I did not die, Billy, tho' I were hard hit."

"No, I got well an' I tuk ther trail arter El Bravo an' his pirts, an' tho' I found thet I were too late ter save my children, fer they was dead, poor things, I hes been on ther track o' ther slayers ever since, an' many is ther one I hes kilt."

"Well, my friend, I, too, have been on a trail for years; but it is in search of one who was taken from me by a wicked man that I have at last been led to believe is El Bravo."

"I also believe that he holds the one I seek a captive in his stronghold, and I shall find out, and if so, woe be unto him."

"I hes heard o' yer cirkilatin' about ther lower Rio Grande, like ther Wanderin' Jew, I hes heard on but never come acrost, an' as we both hes ther same trail ter foller, heur are my fist thet we sticks tergether ter ther end."

"Agreed!" and Billy Blue-Eyes grasped the rough, hard hand extended to him, and the compact between them being made, they soon after lay down to sleep with a feeling of perfect security in the old ruin which the Mexicans shunned as the abode of evil spirits.

CHAPTER XII.

AN OUTLAW'S DOOM.

As both Billy Blue-Eyes and Terror Tom had felt assured, El Bravo had beaten back his old enemy, Oak Heart, and with considerable loss.

His ambush proved a most deadly one, and though the red-skins, knowing their superiority of numbers, rallied after the first recall, they were gradually beaten back, and at last put to flight.

As soon as his men gathered the Indian scalps, for the outlaws believed in the old maxim of "fighting the devil with fire," the Pirates of the Chaparral moved with their wounded and dead toward the camp, which seemed quite cheerful with its welcoming fires.

The dead were to be summarily disposed of by throwing them into the river, for it saved the trouble and work of burial, and the wounded were to be borne to the retreat for nursing.

Among the first to ride into the camp, gloating over his victory, was the masked chief.

He had searched the field most thoroughly, hoping to find the dead body of Terror Tom, whom the men under his lieutenant had led him to believe was leading the Indians, and his disappointment somewhat cooled his triumph, as he had found the Texan scout a most deadly foe for years, and well knew the cause, as his own hand had struck the blow against his home and those he loved.

Arriving in the edge of the timber he found the group of men there awaiting him, and most eager spectators had they been of the distant fight.

"Well, cap'n, I 'graterlates yer on whippin' ther reds," cried Long Saul, the man in charge of the squad, and who had an eye to the vacancy left by the death of the lieutenant.

"Yes, we whipped them badly, Long Saul, and the boys took some twenty scalps; but the scout, Terror Tom was not killed, and none of the men saw him in the fight."

"Oh, he were thar tho'."

"That may be; but which is my fire?" and El Bravo rode on into the timber, for, as I have said, he always ate and slept apart from his men.

"Thet one yonder, cap'n, not far from whar ther pris— Holy Prophets! he are gone!"

The eyes of all now fell upon the tree to which Billy Blue-Eyes had been bound, and from every lip came the cry:

"Gone!"

"Who is gone, you hound?" yelled the chief in a fury.

"Ther prisoner."

"Where was he?"

"Tied to thet tree when ther fight begun," almost whispered Long Saul.

"Which tree?" and the chief had become strangely calm.

Long Saul led the way to the tree to which Billy Blue-Eyes had been bound, and the severed bonds were found, but the boy had gone.

"Ha! while you fools have been gazing at the fight, that accursed foe of our band, Terror Tom, has quietly crept under your very noses and released the prisoner."

"By heaven! I have half a mind to swing every one of you up for this, as we now have two foes upon our trail whose rifles will ring in our ears continually."

"Long Saul, you were in charge, and by the Montezumas, but you shall hang for this!"

"Where is my bugler, Bonita?"

"There he comes, Senor El Bravo," tremblingly answered Long Saul, pointing to the young bugler who just then rode into the timber.

"Ho, Bonita!" called out the chief, and in ringing tones, as clear and musical as his bugle-notes, came back the answer:

"Si, Senor Chief El Bravo!"

"Sound the rally and repeat it, for I wish my men here at once!"

"Si, senor," and at once the silence of the night was broken by the ringing tones of the silver bugle.

Piercing the distance, it reached the coming bandits, who were moving slowly with their dead and wounded, and they hastened on at a pace that brought groans of agony from the sufferers.

A few moments passed in silence in the timber, for upon joining his chief Bonita saw that something had gone wrong, and a second glance told him that Blue-eyed Billy had escaped.

He made no comment, but waited in silence, for he knew the character of El Bravo so well that he felt some wretch must bear the penalty of the escape of the young Rio Grande Rover.

Soon the men began to file rapidly into the timber and formed a semicircle as they came up, presenting a strange sight, a picturesque yet terrible one.

The fires burned brightly, and the chief, Long Saul and his immediate comrades, and the Bandit Bugler, were the center of the group.

Then there were the bandits on foot, their horses weighted down with the dead and wounded, and groans of anguish at their sufferings, wrung from strong men, were the only sounds to be heard other than the crackling of the blazing logs.

"Men, my prisoner has escaped."

"I left him in the charge of this man, Long Saul, who thereby was able to avoid our fight, and he has been recreant to his duty."

"To fail in duty in the band of the Pirates of the Chaparral you know well merits death, and hence Long Saul shall die," and the chief spoke in his clear, distinct tones that all knew were in deadly earnest.

"Mercy, cap'n; fer tho' I is willin' ter risk death in a fight, I doesn't like ter face it at ther end o' a lariat!" cried Long Saul.

"No, you allowed one to escape whom I have long wished in my power, and you must suffer the penalty."

"Here, you men who were also guilty, get a lariat about his neck and string him to yonder limb and there leave him, for I shall move on to-night."

"Say, cap'n, hain't yer goin' ter give a good man a chance, fer I has sarved yer well?" said Long Saul, as they were putting the rope about his neck and pinioning his arms behind his back.

"You serve me as the rest of the men do, to protect yourself and to enrich yourself," was the cool reply.

"But I ought to have time to think up a few prayers I ust ter know, but which I hes forgot!"

"Prayers will do you no good after the life you have led, and forced from you by fear, and besides I have no time to lose, for I wish to get across the river by dawn."

"But cap'n I—"

"Hoist him up there and choke off his tongue!" was the savage order, and it was so literally obeyed that the tightening lariat cut short the words of the poor wretch as he was dragged up into the air.

"Now, men, get ready for the march, and follow me," coolly said the chief, and he rode out of the timber on his way to the nearest crossing of the Rio Grande, and slowly his band followed him, silent and gloomy, for Long Saul had been a favorite with all, and besides they knew that Terror Tom now had a bold ally to aid him in dogging their trail.

CHAPTER XIII.

EL BRAVO STRIKES A TRAIL.

WHEN El Bravo and his young bugler reached the other side of the Rio Grande it was nearly dawn, and they halted to await the coming of the band.

As the dead were to be let go in the middle of the river, it took some little time up ere all got across, weighted down as were the able-bodied with the wounded, and dawn had come ere they all reached the Mexican shore.

While waiting, El Bravo had been diligently searching for trails, and perfect borderman that he was it did not take him long to find the tracks left by Terror Tom and Billy Blue-Eyes.

But the third horse he could not account for, nor was Bonita able to enlighten him.

"And now, Bonita, they have turned sharp off up the river as soon as they landed, keeping close in under the banks, and this course they could not keep for any great distance, as you know the quicksands are a mile above," said the chief.

"Yes, senor."

"They have, then, turned into some water-gulch, and are hiding there, and we can easily catch them, for I know of no way that they can get out without coming back here."

"Si, senor chief."

"I shall, therefore, halt the men right here, and all shall go on the hunt for them—ah! there is Mexican Miguel, and he can tell me what I wish to know."

"Ho! Miguel!"

"Si, Senor El Bravo," answered a dark, evil-faced, wiry built Mexican, clad like a dandy in the costume of his country.

"You know this shore well?"

"Every foot, senor."

"And any one going up the shore under the bank here, could not continue very far?"

"No, senor."

"Why, Miguel?"

"The quicksands are a mile above, senor."

"But the water-washes!"

"They are plenty."

"But are too precipitous for a person to get up?"

"Yes, senor."

"Then if our foes went up this way they could not get out?"

"Not now, senor; but—"

"Well, Miguel?"

"There was one water-wash that ran back into the chaparral to the old padre's chapel, now known as the Devil's Ranch, senor."

"The padre had a way made through it to the river, and then one could go from the Mier trail down the water-wash to the Rio Grande."

"But that was long ago, and now the chaparral has grown so dense at the head of the water-wash and around the chapel, that a wolf could hardly get through."

"And certainly not a horse?"

"No, senor."

"And a man, Miguel?"

"Would tear himself to pieces upon the thorns, senor."

"Then, Miguel, our foes, Terror Tom and the Boy Rover are up that water-wash and can be captured."

"But the chapel, senor?"

"Well?"

"Why, it is haunted by the devil."

"I do not fear spirits, Miguel."

"But diabolos, senor?"

"I care not, Miguel, for the silly tales of the people about the old ruin."

"I have heard that a priest was murdered there long years ago, and that the place is a ruin and all dread it."

"But these two Americans dread nothing, and there we will find them, if they can get out of the water-wash, and if not, they will be on this side of the river, hiding in some of the gulleys, for here leads their trail."

"Ah, senor, don't go there, for there is a curse on the Devil's Ranch, and death will follow," said Miguel, warningly.

"Bah! I will go, so come on, all but half a dozen of you men, who are to remain with the wounded!"

Miguel shook his head and not a man moved.

"Did you hear?" yelled El Bravo.

No answer came.

"I order you to follow me!"

"Senor chief, we will go anywhere but there, and not a man will follow you to the Devil's Ranch," firmly said the Mexican.

El Bravo saw that every man was determined, and then said sternly:

"Superstitious fools! I will go alone."

"Here, Bonita, I leave you in command, so move on to the hacienda with the band," and without another word El Bravo rode away, following the river close under the bank, while Bonita placed himself at the head of the band and gave the order to move on up the steep hill to the plateau, where they would strike the trail leading to their hacienda in the mountains, and which was their refuge in danger, and the place where they kept all of their booty and stolen stock.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHIEF'S DISCOVERY.

ONE reason of El Bravo's great power over his men was, that they had often seen that he was wholly devoid of fear, and would face any

danger with a nerve that won their admiration. Then, too, he seemed to bear a charmed life, for he was never known to have been wounded, though men had sunk down dead upon all sides of him.

His utter scorn of priests and prayers, his ever masked face and indomitable will, held his men also under a superstitious fear of him, while the Mexicans of the band were wont to believe that he was allied with Satan, or had sold himself to him.

He was liberal, too, with his men, was successful in his raids, and on several occasions, when one or more of the band had been captured, he would dash into the Texan or Mexican town where they were prisoners and rescue them.

Then, too, he had never pardoned a neglect of duty, and ruled with an iron hand.

But when he yielded to their superstitious dread of the Devil's Ranch they admired him the more for it, well knowing that he did not do so from fear of them, when he boldly went alone to face any danger he might find there.

For some few hundred yards up the river the outlaw chief followed the trail he so longed to trace to its end.

He read "signs" like an Indian, yet soon lost it, for nowhere was a trail visible after the first water-wash was reached.

Nothing daunted, he staked his horse out and set to work with a determination not to be thwarted, and examined foot by foot every foot of the ground.

It was tedious work, and noon passed and sunset came, and yet he was unsuccessful.

He could see that the trail led up the river and that those who made it had not gone by the quicksand he knew, as he did also that they had not retraced their way to the crossing or their tracks would have been visible.

Not a man to readily give up, he determined to "camp on the trail," so to speak in prairie parlance, and this he did.

Somehow it was broad day when he awoke, and he arose hastily from his serape, took a plunge in the river to refresh himself and then ate his breakfast of dry bread and *tasajo*, his horse faring better than his master, as he had struck a plot of grass.

As he resumed his trailing he started, for there came to his knowledge the fact that some one had very recently passed within a few rods of where he had been asleep.

That "some one" was mounted, for there was the plain, fresh trail.

He could have followed that to the river crossing, but he knew that it must have come from the hiding-place in the gulch which he was seeking, and consequently he determined to trail it back to its starting point.

This he did, and in an hour's time came to the head of the water-wash, and at the point where the dead padre had long ago improved it so as to make it passable.

It was now almost impassable from long disuse, and overgrown with a dwarf thicket, but where one man had ridden El Bravo dare ride, and up he went to the top, though it was a severe pull upon his horse.

There stood before him the ruined chapel, or, as it was then known, the Devil's Ranch.

The graves of the murdered padre and his peon servants were near, but at these the chief gave but a cursory glance.

He saw that the rambling old *adobe* ruin had been long deserted, and that the chaparral had grown so densely around it as to form an impassable barrier to any one reaching the river trail by that way.

In front of the old *jacal* two horses were feeding, and one he knew must be the steed of Billy Blue-Eyes.

The other animal was one he recognized as having belonged to one of his men, who had accompanied Lieutenant Hal, and had met his death with that officer.

The third horse of the three that had made the trail he followed was the one whose trail he had pursued to that spot.

"Well, I shall find here the boy, I know, and perhaps Terror Tom, and I must prepare for hot work and make it end quickly.

"The Texan Wanderer may have gone on the horse that went down the river, and it may be a Mexican guide who brought him and the Boy Rover here; but at any rate I shall have two to fight."

So saying, he quickly dismounted from his horse, staked him out, looked to his arms, and with a revolver in each hand started to reconnoiter.

He advanced cautiously, keeping close to the wall of the old house, and making for the half-open door at one end.

His step was like that of a panther and his look that of a wild beast about to spring upon his prey.

Reaching the door he suddenly threw it wide open and sprung within, while he cried, in ringing tones:

"Ho, devils! El Bravo is upon you!"

His attitude was that of a man who expected to find deadly foes and to face them to the bitter end.

His glance around the room showed him a serape spread upon the floor, to serve as a bed, a saddle doing service as a pillow, and upon this rude couch a form reclining.

It was Billy Blue-Eyes; and he knew that he was fairly caught; but rising to a sitting posture he coolly said, while he held up his manacled hands:

"You hold the winning hand, El Bravo, for see, I still wear your irons."

"Ay, boy, and you shall go to your grave with them on!" was the savage rejoinder of the chief, as he stepped forward and confronted the youth, though still keeping on his guard against surprise, for he believed there was yet some one else about from whom to expect a shot, and he was not to be caught off his guard after his triumph in recapturing Billy Blue-Eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTOR AND CAPTIVE.

FOR a moment the bandit chief stood eying his young prisoner, who took his capture most coolly indeed.

At the same time his eyes were roving about against a surprise.

"Well, boy, where is your pard?" he asked.

"Whom do you mean?"

"The one you got caught in rescuing three nights ago?"

"Oh! Terror Tom, the Texan Wanderer?" asked Billy, quietly.

"Yes."

"The man who makes you and your band live in fear of death?" and the youth seemed to delight in torturing him.

"Yes, curse you, if so you will, for he is a deadly foe upon our track."

"And has cause to be?"

"Doubtless; but we will not discuss that."

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"By the time you count your men again you may find out," was the significant reply.

"Ha! he has gone again upon our trail, has he?"

"Perhaps."

"When did he go?"

"Before dawn an hour or so."

"Ah, yes, it was his trail then I followed here."

"But where is your other companion?"

The youth looked at him in surprise.

"I asked where your other pard is?"

"Haven't got any."

"You have three horses, or had, when you came up the river?"

"Yes."

"Who is the rider of the third animal?"

"He was one of your men, but he is dead, and we only have the horse and the saddle as a souvenir of the deceased cutthroat," came the response.

"That accounts for it."

"You are alone in this *hacienda* then?"

"No."

"Ah, who else is here with you?" quickly asked the chief.

"The blackest-hearted devil on the Rio Grande, and whom men call El Bravo, the Captain of the Chaparral Pirates," was the bold reply.

"*Nombre de Dios!* but you shall rue these words, boy."

"I do not fear you, El Bravo."

"You fear death," said the chief, in a sinister tone.

"Oh, no, for if I did I would not live a life that was in deadly peril day and night."

"Well, you once found out a little plan I had to make a raid, and thwarted it, and—"

"That was some time ago, down near Comargo?" said Billy Blue-Eyes, in a meditative tone.

"Yes."

"I remember, and you threatened to some day hang me for it!"

"I did, and I shall keep that threat."

"You may, but I doubt it."

"You are a bold one, my Boy Rover of the Rio Grande; but you shall see."

"Now tell me when you expect that Texan back?"

"What Texan?"

"Terror Tom."

"Oh, yes; well, he may be back in time to help me hang you, El Bravo."

In spite of his nerve El Bravo winced at this, but answered:

"I shall look out that he does not, by taking you at once with me."

"Come!"

"Where?"

"To my *hacienda*."

"It is said that those who enter there leave hope behind."

"So you will find it."

"I'll take the chances of proving you a liar, El Bravo, so, as I am wholly at your mercy lead on."

The youth arose as he said this, gathered up his *serape*, as well as he could, and walked over to the corner where stood his rifle, his belt of arms hanging across the muzzle.

"Hold on! none of that!" yelled the chief.

"Oh! you'll carry them for me, then, for I don't wish to lose them," said Billy Blue Eyes most innocently.

"Yes, I'll carry them for you, for, ironed though you are, if you got your grip on your revolver you could use it."

"I believe I could."

"Let me try and see."

"No trifling boy, or I'll shoot you."

"No you won't, for you wish to keep me to see me die by hanging, and give your cutthroats at your stronghold a treat," and Billy accompanied the chief to the door, and looked about with surprise, when he saw none of his band with him.

"Why, where are your fellow cutthroats?" he asked.

"They have gone on to my *hacienda*."

"You don't mean to say you came alone to this haunted chapel?"

"I do."

"Wer'n't you afraid of ghosts?"

"Boy, I fear nothing on earth," was the stern reply.

"You fear to show your face," returned Billy coolly.

The chief muttered a curse, and leading his captive to the side of his horse, saddled the animal and told him to mount.

Billy Blue-Eyes, his wrists bound together though they were, placed his hands upon the saddle horn with an agility that caused El Bravo to remark:

"You are as agile as a panther, boy."

Billy made no response, and mounting his own horse, and leading Jet and the other animal, El Bravo rode away from the Devil's Ranch fully satisfied with his visit there.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP.

TERROR TOM left the Devil's Ranch when it was yet dark, bound on his mission to get files to cut the manacles from off the wrists of Billy Blue-Eyes.

This circumstance prevented his either seeing the trail of El Bravo, or the sleeping chief to whom he passed so near.

With perfect confidence in the superstition of the natives, he did not dread, or suspect the presence of any one near him, and as El Bravo alone dared face the terrors of the haunted chapel, it will be seen that he had good reason for feeling the place would be avoided by all.

He rode along at a lively pace, the horse of the dead lieutenant of bandits being a good one, and without adventure reached the *jacal* of the Mexican whom he went to seek.

The files were secured, and after waiting until nearly dark, Terror Tom set off upon his return.

He had not ridden far before he saw a jackass coming toward him with a priest mounted upon his back.

The ears of the brute were long, and flopped as he walked, and he had a most dejected look that seemed to well suit his rider.

As Terror Tom drew near, according to the custom of the country he saluted the priest with the greatest humility; and the latter drew rein and said, in deep tones:

"Peace be with you, my son."

The Spanish of the Texan was not as good as his English, although he spoke a certain *patois* fluently, and he at once entered into conversation with the priest by asking him if there was any danger from bandits upon the trail leading to the river.

"No, my son, for I have come that way, and none have offered to molest me," was the answer.

"Oh, you could go from one end of Mexico to the other and no outlaw would disturb you, good father."

"But I am a trader, and with me it is different," said Terror Tom.

The priest then said:

"Dismount, my son, and kneel by my animal, that I may bestow upon you my blessing, and it may shield you from harm upon your way."

"Durn yer blessin'!" muttered Terror Tom to himself; but he did as directed, and kneeling by the side of the jackass, bended his head reverently, for he felt that he dared not anger the good padre.

"Now, my son, take my blessing and—if you move an inch you are a dead man, *Senor Terror Tom!*"

The last words were spoken sternly, and the Texan felt the muzzle of a revolver suddenly thrust against his forehead.

In spite of the threatening mandate, he did move his head enough to allow his eyes to discover that the supposed priest was a wolf in sheep's wool, for he saw beneath his long robe the dress of a Mexican *caballero*.

Terror Tom felt that he was caught, but said calmly, while he itched to get his hand upon his revolver:

"Well, you is a lamb with claws, baint yer?"

He spoke now in English, and the man returned in the same language, and which he spoke with slight accent:

"I am one that can use my claws, too; so up with your hands above your head, Terror Tom, if you value your life."

"Who is yer?"

"One of El Bravo's men."

"So I thought; but how did yer recog me?"

"I was on the road when you went to Pinto's Ranch this morning, and knew you at a glance, for I have seen you often, *Senor Tom*, and you gave me a shot once that kept me laid up for months."

"But I forgive you, now that I have you a prisoner, and when I take you to the chief he'll promote me, I know."

"You oughter be permoted with a rope, yer durned Diego cut-throat!" growled Tom.

"Oh, I don't mind your cursing me, *Senor Terror Tom*, for I hold the trumps now."

"But come, my horse and two comrades are waiting a mile up the road for us, and I am anxious to get you there, for you are a tricky devil, *Senor Terror Tom*."

"Yas, I were born thet way, an' it's likely I'll die tricky," was the apparently-humble remark, and still Terror Tom dared not move, for the revolver-muzzle was shoved hard against his temple.

"Come, no nonsense; so up with your hands above your head!" sternly said his Mexican captor.

"What fer?"

"Oh, I have a pair of irons to slip upon them."

"Waal, you hes got me sure, baint yer?"

"I have, and there is no escape for you; and the boys will have a time when you are hanged."

"Yas, I guesses they'll enjoy it."

"They will, indeed. But obey me, and up with your hands!"

"Sartin, pard Greaser, ef yer says so."

And up went the hands, the right one clutching the revolver-muzzle and knocking it from its deadly position, while the left suddenly grasped a weapon that, like a flash, was turned upon the pretended priest.

"*Demonio Gringo!*"* cried the Mexican, so cleverly caught, his face livid with rage.

"Yas, you kin swear now, in spite o' yer pious clothin', yer cussed Greaser."

"But it are my time ter give yer my blessin', an' yer'll git it sharp an' piercin' right out o' this weapin ef yer don't dance ter ther tune I is goin' ter play."

"Ah, *senor*, it was but a joke, for I am not one of El Bravo's men but an honest *ranchero*, who—"

"You is a rantin' liar, an' I says it, so now jist let go yer holt on yer weepin', or my shootin' iron goes off an' yer is dead meat."

The hold of the Mexican was quickly loosened, and then Terror Tom very coolly began to "go through him," by first taking off his belt of arms, so securely hidden beneath his priestly robe, and searching him most thoroughly, transferring all he found to his own pockets.

"I isn't done with yer yet, Pard Greaser, fer I'll perceed ter put these irons on you which

yer hed intended fer me, an' then I'll borry yer clothes fer a spell."

"Come, we'll jist step inter them mesquites thar an' make a change o' raiment."

With a celerity that was remarkable Terror Tom then put the handcuffs upon his prisoner, tied his feet securely, and gagging him, bound him to a tree, having already stripped from him his sacred garb.

"Now, Greaser, I is goin' ter do a leetle biz on my own hook, an' you is ter help me," said Terror Tom in a manner that showed he had some desperate plot on hand.

CHAPTER XVII.

A WOLF IN LAMB'S WOOL.

"PARD Greaser, yer will perceed ter be rigged out as Terror Tom now," remarked the Texan when he had stripped the Mexican of his priestly garb.

The prisoner was powerless to resist, and being gagged, could utter no word of remonstrance, while Terror Tom coolly took off his well worn attire and put it on the Mexican.

The dress of the other he then rigged himself out in, putting on over all the priestly robe and hat.

"It are now putty near dark, so we mout as well start, Pard Greaser," said Terror Tom, and forcing the Mexican to mount his horse, he bound him securely to him, and then placed the reins in his manacled hands.

"Now, Padre Tom will ride ther jack," said the Texan, as he threw himself astride the homely beast, while he continued:

"Doesn't I look ther padre now, Greaser?"

"Oh, yer can't talk with half a lariat jammed inter yer lyin' mouth; but yer kin hear, an' I wants yer ter listen."

"I are a padre, does yer hear?"

"Waal, you is Terror Tom who I, ther padre, hes jist tuk in, an' we rides right up ther road ter whar yer left yer pards, fer I wishes ter make ther 'quaintance."

"It'll be too dark fer 'em ter see which is t'other, as we rides up; but they'll be lookin' fer yer, an' when yer is near 'em, I jist wants yer ter shout what I tells yer."

"Ef yer doesn't, yer'll git a knife atween yer ribs."

"Now come on, Greaser, an' fearin' yer horse mout git alarmed an' skip off, I'll jist hold ther eend o' ther lariat."

So saying, Terror Tom urged his awkward brute into a walk, and with the horse and prisoner alongside, he started up the trail.

"Now don't deceive me, Greaser, fer yer know I hain't one ter stand triflin'."

"Whar is yer pards?"

As Tom asked the question he leaned forward and took the horse-hair lasso acting as a gag from the mouth of the Mexican.

At first the man could not speak; but after a moment he said:

"In yonder mesquite grove," and he pointed ahead to a clump of trees not far away.

"Oho! waal, now I'll ride closer, an' ef yer valys thet carkiss o' yours, jist do as I tell yer."

They rode on together for a couple of hundred yards, and Terror Tom held ready for use a knife in his hand of which the Mexican seemed to stand in holy terror.

"What is ther handle o' yer pards?"

"Pedro and Fuente," was the low reply.

"Is you sure?"

"I am."

"Waal, be sartin, fer a mistake in a name might cost your friends oneasiness about you."

Nearer they drew to the trees, and as it was still light enough to see at some little distance, Terror Tom kept his head bent down, and his hat drawn over his eyes, to hide his bearded face.

"Now, Greaser, sing out as I tells yer. Does yer hear me talk?" said Terror Tom, in a low, stern tone.

"Si, *senor*," was the humble response.

"Then shout:

"'Pedro! Fuente! I has him safe!'"

The Mexican hesitated, but he saw an ominous movement of Terror Tom's right hand, and out he cried, though his voice trembled:

"Ho, Pedro! Fuente! I have got him!"

A joyous shout came back from the timber in response, and the next instant out stepped two forms, coming to meet their comrade, as they believed, the captor of their fearful foe Terror Tom.

"You worked it well, Benevide," cried one.

"Yes, you've got him sure, *camarada*," said the other, as the two drew near, and the jackass and horse came to a halt.

"Yer is both shriekin' liars, to the tune o' Yankee Doodle!"

The strange voice and words fell like a thunderclap upon the two men, who started back, as they were suddenly confronted with revolvers, for Terror Tom, held a weapon in each hand, and the muzzles covered the hearts of the two bandits.

They then saw, even in that uncertain light, the bearded face of Terror Tom, beneath the priestly hat, and recognized that their comrade had been beaten at his own game, while he cried out in startled tones:

"*Camoradas*, the Gringo demon has defeated us."

Hardly were his words uttered, when one of the bandits thrust forward a weapon to fire; but ere he could take aim, a flash and sharp report came, and he fell dead in his tracks.

The other bandit however managed to fire his pistol; but the startled jack just then threw up his ungainly head, and caught the bullet in his brain.

With a groan almost human the jack fell to the ground, while his rider drew bead upon his foe, and he too went to earth.

"I hev half a mind tu shoot you, too, an' complete ther work—an' I will—no I won't, fer I'd spile my own clothin'," and Terror Tom lowered the weapon he had half-aimed at his prisoner, while he continued:

"And you is ironed too, an' I don't shoot a man as can't scratch fer hisself."

"But come, I wants yer out o' my duds, so ondress durned lively."

He pulled the Mexican from the saddle as he spoke, and quickly had him disrobed of his suit, while he gave him back his own.

"I guesses I might need there gerloots' attire, so I'll jist borry it."

It took him but a moment to secure the clothing of the two men he had slain, and still keeping on the priestly garb, he led out from the thicket the three horses of the bandits and mounting his prisoner upon one, sprung upon the back of his own animal, and started up the trail.

"These heur animiles will lead all right, Pard Greaser, an' I still looks ther padre, so ef we meets any one, jist keep yer mouth shet an' don't hinder my music, ef I goes ter play a leetle game, or yer'll die 'thout bein' able ter toot a pra'ar."

"Does yer hear, Mex?"

The Mexican grumbled forth a surly reply, and then Terror Tom set forth upon his return to the Devil's Ranch, leaving the two foes he had killed unburied where they had fallen.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PRISONER'S FATE.

It was midnight before Terror Tom and his prisoner arrived at the Devil's Ranch.

Ever cautious, and though he believed all was as he had left it, Terror Tom yet approached warily.

Coming up out of the water-wash, he suddenly drew rein, for, though the wing of the old hacienda where he had left Billy Blue-Eyes, was in full view, he yet saw no glimmer of light.

What could it mean? Had the boy gone to sleep and let the fire go out?

Such were the questions that he asked himself.

To be on the safe side, he rode to a tree that stood near the bank of the river and securely fastened the horse of the prisoner to it, at the same time making the legs of the Mexican fast beneath the animal.

"I doesn't onderstan' jist how matters is, Greaser, so I leaves you heur ter ponder a bit, while I takes a squint by myself," he said as he brought his rifle round ready for use and moved noiselessly toward the hacienda.

"I thinks no man w'd come heur, fer they is more feerd o' ghosts an' speerits in these heur parts, than they is o' livin' folkses."

"But then thar must be some gerloot thet didn't get skeert 'thout he seen suthin' ter skeer at, an' I'll jist see fer myse'f."

So saying, he reached the side of the ruin and crept along step by step, his rifle ready to greet any foe.

At last he came to the door opening into the wing where he had left Blue-Eyed Billy. The door was ajar, and all was silent.

"I doesn't half like it, fer I hes thet feelin' thet no human are about," he said.

For a moment he stood there, and then called out in a low tone:

"Beely!"

No answer came, and again he called.

"I say, Beely, is yer thar?"

Still no answer.

"He mout hev hed visitors, an' I hain't ther man ter intrude upon 'em 'thout a inwite, so

* A term of hatred applied by Mexicans to Americans.—THE AUTHOR.

"I'll jist cirkilate aroun' an' see ef ther critters is whar I left 'em."

He left the hacienda as he spoke and had a search around the chaparrals.

But nowhere were the horses, and this convinced him that something was surely wrong.

"Ef it were daylight I c'd see by ther trails," he said.

The horses being gone, and no place to conceal them, caused Terror Tom to feel that the youth must also be away, for he had that instinct that told him the hacienda was really deserted.

Going back to the wing he boldly stepped in and struck a match.

By its light he saw that the large room held no occupant.

"The boy is gone, that are durned sartin. He didn't go alone, that are durned sartinter. Now, who tuk him?"

This question Terror Tom pondered over a moment, and then said to himself:

"It are some hours ter daybreak, an' I kin then diskiver what has been did, an' what I is ter do, so I'll jist stake the animiles out an' lay down ter sleep, an' give ther Greaser a chance too fer forty winks, ef his conscience don't keep him awake."

Throwing a few fagots upon the hearth he quickly kindied a blaze, and then started out to bring in his prisoner.

His own horse, and the two he had captured were feeding near, and he staked them out as he passed, removing from them the saddles.

Then he went toward the prisoner.

But ere he had taken a dozen steps there came a loud, pleading cry in Spanish:

"Quick, senior, for the love of God!"

It was the Mexican prisoner that cried, and Terror Tom bounded toward him, to suddenly stop short and give a spring backward.

And just in time, for there came several loud snaps, the ground seemed sinking beneath his feet, the large tree to which the prisoner's horse was tied, swayed wildly, and the animal plunged and snorted with terror, in a vain effort to escape his doom, while the terrified rider shrieked in accents of horror his prayers for the Virgi's aid.

For a few seconds the tree swayed, the ground sunk, and Terror Tom stood like a statue, looking on, yet unable to aid the unfortunate man.

Then, as he saw that the tree and the earth around it for a dozen feet were sinking, and would dash down into the boiling river, he threw his rifle forward, crying:

"Ther wretch hes got ter go, an' this are more marcifal, fer it are instantan'ous. God help yer guilty soul, pard, and I'll end the miz'ry yer'd suffer."

With the last word he fired, and the Mexican's head fell forward, just as the great mass of earth, with the tree, horse and rider, went down like an arrow into the Rio Grande, many feet below, which engulfed it in its foaming waters.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BANDITS' RETREAT.

It was a ride of some leagues from the Devil's Ranch to the retreat of the Chaparral Pirates, and to which their chief gave the name of "El Hacienda."

The spot was well chosen for a retreat, for it was situated in the wilds of the hills, with the approaches to it well guarded by nature, for the trails leading thereto, and three in number, went through *passes* that a few men could hold against many.

The house was an adobe structure, strongly built and very large, with huge wings running here and there, and had been the home of a wealthy old Mexican, who, having offended his government, had gone there to dwell, surrounded by his peon servants and a small army of cowboys to care for his immense flocks.

The cabins for these were near the main building, and all were surrounded by a high and thick *adobe* wall, the top of which had been armed by rows of spikes, which rendered it almost impossible for a man to scale, and especially so when he was a target for rifle bullets from the turrets on the top of the mansion.

With plenty of water at hand, buildings filled with tons of *tasajo* and other provisions, stacks of provender for horses, and a magazine of ammunition, and a small howitzer guarding the approaches to the place, it was no wonder that El Bravo felt secure in his retreat.

His government would not molest him, for the wily chief raided only on the American side of the Rio Grande, and this rather pleased the Mexican officials, who have never forgotten

the bitterness engendered by the war with Mexico any more than have Texans forgotten the *Alamo*.

With Billy Blue-Eyes riding by his side, securely bound to his noble black, and the riderless animal leading, El Bravo approached his stronghold.

Arriving at the pass that guarded his dominions, the chief said angrily:

"There should be a look-out here," and riding up to a tree, beneath which was a hammock, he seized hold of a lariat that had a huge iron ring in the end of it, and jerked it violently.

Billy Blue-Eyes was interested in watching everything that transpired in spite of his peril, and he saw that the lariat went through a pulley in the tree, and then was connected by many others, passing through the tops of poles which disappeared out of sight a quarter of a mile up the valley.

With his hand in the iron ring, El Bravo kept pulling away, while his eyes were bent up the canyon, or vale.

Above the pass, which was a narrow way between two high hills with precipitous sides, Billy Blue-Eyes noticed a line of breastworks several feet high, as though to protect riflemen, and glancing behind him, he saw that they could wholly command the approach.

Soon there was heard a rumbling sound, then the clatter of hoofs, and a horseman dashed into view.

Next, half a hundred more came on at a rush, and drawn by two horses was a six pound howitzer.

Up to the pass they dashed, Bonita, the Bandit Bugler at their head, and beholding their chief they halted and gazed upon him with surprise, while their eyes roved over to poor Billy, who met their gaze with the coolest indifference.

"Ah, senior, I am glad to see you back.

"Is there danger?" said Bonita.

"Yes, Bonita, there is danger, but no threatened attack.

"But I gave the alarm for an attack, as I came to the pass and found it unguarded," sternly said the chief.

"Unguarded, Senior El Bravo?"

"Yes, Bonita, and I ask what does it mean, for a force could have marched upon the Hacienda and captured it, taking all by surprise."

"True, senior; but when I passed through with the band, after leaving you, there was a guard here, and that was last night, and I certainly supposed there was one here now."

"I do not blame you, Bonita, but the man who has deserted his post.

"Ho, men, whose place is it to be on duty here to-day?" and the chief looked over the crowd in a way that boded no good for the delinquent.

"It was my place, senior chief, but I left here several hours ago to see my poor brother Beppo, who came back wounded, and is dying."

The speaker was a Mexican, and a man with a fearless though evil face, and he rode out from the crowd and confronted the chief.

"I am sorry for you, Gonzalez, for you have been one of my best men; but you know I show no mercy, and as you left the hacienda unguarded you must die."

"As you will, senior chief; but I would crave mercy this one time, as my poor brother but a few moments ago died in my arms, and we loved each other, El Bravo, even though the brand of outlaw is upon us."

"No, I will spare no man who deserts his post," was the reply.

"Look here, El Bravo, you are lower than a brute not to spare that brave man.

"Who are you, that you cannot once break your iron word and show mercy?"

All turned upon the speaker.

It was Billy Blue-Eyes, and he faced the chief with unflinching mien.

"By the Eagle of the Aztecs! but I have half a mind to make you his executioner by those words," cried the savage chief.

"You can lead a horse to water, El Bravo, but you cannot make him drink," was the cool reply of Billy Blue-Eyes.

"What! You still dare me?" yelled El Bravo.

"Why not?"

"I do not fear you."

"We shall see."

"Go ahead," came the reckless dare, and the chief shouted:

"Gonzalez, take your stand there!"

He indicated a spot twenty paces from the tree.

Silently the brave man walked to the spot.

"I did intend to hang you, Gonzalez; but in

consideration for what you have been in the past, I shall let you die by a bullet."

"Thank you, senior," was the calm response.

"Now, men, unbind that youth from his horse and stand him under that tree!"

The order was obeyed, Billy Blue-Eyes making no resistance whatever.

Throwing a key to Bonita, the chief continued:

"Bonita, have that daring youths' feet tied securely, and then unlock the manacle from his right wrist, and we shall see if he dare disobey my orders," and all knew that El Bravo was in deadly earnest in whatever he meant to do.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WRONG MAN.

BONITA silently obeyed the order by dismounting and advancing toward Billy Blue-Eyes.

His feet were first fastened securely together, and the chief said:

"Stand him beneath that limb."

He pointed to a large limb of the tree to which the signal rope was attached, and a branch which had held the weight of a score of men dangling at the end of a rope.

"Now put the execution lasso about his neck!"

From beneath a rustic bench Bonita drew forth a large lariat of rawhide, and one end being already noosed, was placed about the neck of the youth, who never flinched from the deadly coil.

"Now unlock that right hand manacle."

This was done.

"Bind his left-hand securely to his side."

This order was also executed silently and with alacrity.

"Now, Bonita, hand to him this weapon, for it is one of his own revolvers, and he knows well how to use it."

As El Bravo spoke he handed to the bugler a weapon which he had taken from the belt of Billy Blue-Eyes.

"Stand there, half a dozen of you, to draw on that rope when I tell you."

The men took their places and seized the other end of the rope that was around the youth's neck, it having been thrown over the limb above his head.

"Now, Senior Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande, I have sentenced that man Gonzalez to death. He dies by the bullet, and you are to shoot him."

"I guess not, El Bravo," recklessly said Billy.

"Well, we shall see."

"The man is a bandit, and like you deserves hanging for his crimes, and under other circumstances I might be willing to call in his chips. But he left his post to go to the side of his dying brother, and he is too brave a man to be shot down like a dog, when his heart made him err, and you should spare him," boldly responded Billy Blue-Eyes.

"My men know, boy, that I never show mercy, and you shall know it too. I give you just five minutes to shoot that man, and if you do not, then I shall order you to be swung up."

"If I do shoot him?" coolly asked Billy.

"Then your life shall be spared."

"For how long?"

"Until I decide what I will do with you."

"I know what your game is, El Bravo."

"Well, sir?"

"You are revengeful toward me because I thwarted you several times in your raids, and then you have heard that I know where there is a gold mine, and you hope to wring from me the secret of where it is; but I guess you better hang me now."

"I will, so help me God!"

"Call on your master, the devil, El Bravo," laughed the fearless boy, and it was evident that his great nerve and pluck had won the admiration of the entire band of outlaws, while Gonzalez said in a kindly tone:

"Senior Blue-Eyes, I am along in years, and sooner or later, if I went by to day, would get knocked over by a bullet, while you are young and have life before you, so send your bullet through my brain, and end this scene. Mind you, through my brain, for they say you are a dead shot, an' I do not wish to suffer. So, fire away, Senior Blue-Eyes, and God bless you!"

The words from Gonzalez caused a hush like death to fall upon all, and the silence was broken by El Bravo's deep tones:

"Two minutes more you have, Senior Blue-Eyes," he said.

"Give me the pistol," and Billy Blue-Eyes turned to Bonita.

Silently he handed it to him, and he looked at it closely to see that it was all right.

"You will not be merciful, El Bravo?" he asked.

"No! and you have but one minute. Stand ready, men!"

The men hauled the rope taut, and then Billy said in his quiet way, addressing Gonzalez:

"Old man, forgive me, for you see El Bravo forces me to kill—him!"

With the last word Billy Blue-Eyes wheeled quickly, threw his revolver forward, and fired.

But the bullet had not been sent into the brain of the prayer-muttering Mexican, but at heart of El Bravo.

CHAPTER XXI.

BILLY BLUE-EYES' SHOT.

THERE seemed not to be one man among all those present, not even the cunning chief himself, who had suspected the *finale* that came, for with the shot of Billy Blue-Eyes, El Bravo sunk forward on the horn of his saddle, clutched wildly at the air, and fell to the ground.

At first the stir of startled horses and excited men created such a scene that one beholding them, and not knowing the cause, would have deemed the riders and steeds all mad.

But through all stood Blue-Eyes cool as an icicle, smiling, and with his right hand still grasping the weapon he had turned upon the chief.

With his feet and left arm bound, he yet had his good right hand free, and was armed, so that, if attacked, he could carry company with him to the happy hunting grounds, he thought.

And after a moment Gonzalez sprung to his side and whispered hastily:

"Senor, you have done a desperate act, but I'll die defending you."

That the outlaws were wild with excitement, yet knew not what to do, was evident, for they swayed to and fro, some mounted, others on foot, talking and gesticulating excitedly.

The chief still lay where he had fallen, and all believed him dead.

"String up the boy!"

Some one of the band had given vent to this cry, and instantly it was taken up with the terrific shout:

"Yes, up with him!"

The man moved toward Billy Blue-Eyes, when suddenly the clear notes of the silver bugle rung out, blowing the call:

"To horse! to horse!"

Involuntarily the men checked their advance upon Billy Blue-Eyes, and some started toward their mustangs to obey the call.

This was just what the Boy Bugler wanted, for he had checked the movement against the prisoner for an instant, and, springing before him, cried in ringing tones:

"Men, hear me, for I am leader now, as El Bravo lies there!"

The band stood astounded. All of them liked the Boy Bugler immensely, and there was not one of the outlaws but owed him gratitude for some favor.

They had seen him tried, too, on many a field, and they knew the silent, handsome boy had a will of iron and nerve to do and dare anything.

He saw his advantage, and instantly continued:

"Self-preservation, we all know, is the first law of nature, and that youth but protected himself, and would not kill one of your number, whom we all like, because he was a brave man, and, erring, had done so to go to a dying brother's side.

"The chief may not be dead; but if he be, then I shall lead this band.

"If he is wounded, I will command until he is restored to health, and that youth is my prisoner, and I warn you that if harm befalls him some head will fall. Gonzalez, I make you responsible for his safe-keeping," and he turned to the man who had so miraculously escaped death by the act of Billy Blue Eyes.

"Yes, senor, I will guard him well. Come, Pedro, Valdez and Henriquez, I need your aid," and he called to three of the men whom he knew he could trust, and promptly they stepped to his side.

This gaining of allies rather staggered the intention of those who had determined to contest the right of the Boy Bugler to be chief, and they yielded quickly when Bonita, kneeling by the side of El Bravo, placed his hand upon his heart and cried:

"He is not dead!"

Tearing the hunting-shirt away, Bonita discovered the bullet wound in the left side, and near the heart evidently.

But El Bravo still lived, and there might be

hope, so he ordered him borne at once to the hacienda.

"Pull off his mask, Bugler, an' let us git a squint at his face, so we'll know him!" cried a tall, rough-faced man, advancing as though to carry out his suggestion.

"Back, sir! El Bravo is not dead yet, and I warn you to be careful of your words!" cried Bonita, and a movement of the dreaded chief caused the fellow to shrink back abashed.

A litter was soon found, and the wounded chief being placed upon it, was borne up to the hacienda, while close behind followed Billy Blue-Eyes, guarded by Gonzalez and his three comrades, the rest of the band bringing up the rear with the horses.

CHAPTER XXII.

TERROR TOM MEANS BUSINESS.

"WAAL, waal! ef thet gerloot hain't gone a-whoopin' ter ther Devil's glory, then I air a wanderin' liar!" cried Terror Tom, as he approached the edge of the bank and gazed far down into the darkness and turmoil below.

He could hear the seething of the waters, their wash against the shore, the plunging and snorting of the drowning mustang, but no cry from the rider, whom in a spirit of mercy, knowing he would die a fearful death, and live ages of agony the minute before life did end, he had shot to put an end to his sufferings, mental and physical.

"Ther bank were shelvin' I guesses, an' ther weight o' ther horse an' galoot, added to ther tree, set it ter cavin' in.

"I is sorry ther horse went, but then I has t'other two an' my own, an' I guesses they'll do.

"Now what is ter be did, Tom Sanford, I axes yer?" and as was often his wont, having asked himself the question he deliberated as to what answer he could make.

"Ah, yes, I hes it, Tom.

"It are thet yer git what sleep yer kin, an' in ther mornin' yer kin diskiver what hev been did with ther boy."

Having come to this conclusion he returned to the house and soon made himself comfortable for the night, but took care to close and bar the door to avoid a surprise.

Then he ate his supper and afterward laid down to sleep, and almost instantly after was lost in deep slumber.

Just at dawn he awoke.

The fagots had burned out, but a fire was soon started, a cup of coffee made, some *tasajo* broiled on the coals, and after partaking of his breakfast Terror Tom felt ready for business.

Reconnoitering the premises he found that it would be impossible for any one to approach through the chaparral, and that by the way of the water-wash only could a person come to the old ruin, unless he came with an ax to cut his path through the thicket and thorns, and that he knew would take a long, long time.

A spring was upon one side of the house, where the horses could get water, and in the grounds about the place there was grass enough to last several animals a week or more.

Going to his saddle he took from it a small hatchet and quickly cut a few long poles, which he placed across the head of the water-wash, and in such a way that a horse could not leave the grounds.

"Now I is ready, I guesses; an' I'll leave them two nags heur until my return," he said.

With his horse—the dead lieutenant's that was—loaded with just what he thought he would need, Terror Tom let him through his fence and started upon the trail down the water-wash, for his search by daylight had shown him that a strange animal had been there, and had gone, and with it Jet, Billy Blue-Eyes' horse.

Going down the water-wash Terror Tom struck the shore and continued along it until he drew near the ford.

Seeing that there was no one visible crossing the river, he moved on up the roadway and soon reached the plateau above.

"Here I are, an' thar is heaps o' humans in this heur kentry thet would be pleased to hear o' my arrival.

"But I is o' a quiet natur', an' don't want ter be disturbed, so I'll perceed ter keep low, fer it are daylight, an' I putty well know ther Greasers as thieves over on ther Mexican side o' ther Rio Grande."

Striking the trail, which led in the direction of the outlaw retreat, for he saw the tracks of Jet and the strange horse had led up the hill, and not across the Rio Grande, Terror Tom determined to press on as rapidly as he could to the hills, which would be a protection to him did he have to fight or run.

He had not ridden far before he came upon a traveler.

It was a Mexican ranchero evidently, and he eyed the Texan closely, and the latter bowed politely, but held on, as he did not care to enter into any conversation with him.

Looking back after he had passed, Terror Tom saw that the stranger hesitated, halted, half turned, as though to follow him, and then went rapidly on his way.

"Yer is wise as a owl, Greaser, not to come nosin' back arter me, fer I are on a trip thet means business from ther jump, an' ef yer had not been perlithe they might hev missed yer at home when ther evenin' time drew near.

"But I guesses yer means biz' too, so I'll jist sarcumvent yer, for I hez a idea I kin play a leetle game thet will fool yer."

With this he dismounted, and muffling the hoofs of his horse, so no track was made, led him off of the main trail into the chaparral.

Here he took the mufflers off and kept off the trails, striking across country and riding at a rapid pace.

By so doing he avoided meeting a few travelers whom otherwise he could not have passed by as easily as the one he had met.

It was toward evening when he at last came in the vicinity of the hacienda of the outlaws, and seeking a position on the hills that overlooked the ranch, with its numerous buildings, he sat down to meditate as soon as he had found a good feeding-place for his horse.

"Thar is ther place, an' heur I are, whar I hev been sev'ral times afore.

"Now what's ter be did?"

"Fust, I is hungry as a b'ar, so I'll feed."

This he did and with evident relish.

"Now my brain-pan are primed fer biz, so I'll jist think a thought or two."

At last his face brightened, and he said:

"I hes it, an' I'll do it, fer they is sich a lot o' sinners in thet ranch I guesses they needs ther service o' a padre an' it jist takes me ter shout Gospel, fer I larnt it from ther dear old 'ooman them devils kilt.

"She were Mexican, an' a good Catholic, an' I knows she are in Heaving; but I guesses she'll never see me thar, tho' she an' my children will know I hes avenged 'em, or is doin' it right along, fer it are a long bill ter pay, fer ther killin' o' them yer loves best on 'arth."

The old Texan choked up here, and tears came into his eyes.

But he brushed them away, sighed, and continued:

"I'll do it.

"I hesn't shaved ther old thorns off sin' I were a-courtin' thirty year ago but heur goes fer all."

He took from his saddle pocket as he spoke a razor and a pair of scissors, with soap and shaving brush, and laid them out before him, just by a small rivulet.

"I hev carried these tricks fer a long time, thinkin' I mout git in a tight place sometime an' need 'em, an' now they comes in, fer I does need 'em fer ther boy.

"Waal, waal, let me see whar ter begin."

After a moment he began well, and with the aid of a small glass, stuck in the top of a blacking-box, he so completely metamorphosed himself, that after putting on the clothing of the priest, which it will be remembered he had taken possession of, he looked indeed the padre.

But had any one looked beneath his priestly robe and beheld his belt, in which was a bowie-knife, and four serviceable revolvers they would have met with a surprise.

"Now, I means biz, an' I goes so as ter git thar jist at dusk.

"An' I goes afoot, fer thet animile o' ther dead loot'nent w'u'd give me away fer a durned fool.

"Oh! but won't I spout Latin at 'em! An' don't I know it too—*In spiritu humilitatis* and et ceteras accordin' as I 'members em," and the pretended padre seemed delighted with the chance he had of "spouting Latin prayers" as he called it, and thought little of the fearful peril in which he was placing himself.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PRICE OF A LIFE.

WHEN Billy Blue-Eyes was taken to the head-quarters of the bandit chief, he was at once placed by Gonzalez in a small, strongly made room in one of the wings.

It was evidently used as a guard-room, for there were but two windows, mere apertures a few inches wide for light and air, and the iron door through which he entered the somewhat dismal chamber.

A hammock, table and chair furnished the

room, and the door was locked behind Billy with no word from his guard, who simply re-clasped the manacle upon his right wrist, and then left him alone with his thoughts.

"Well, this isn't as bad as it might be," was Billy Blue-Eyes' philosophical remark as he glanced around the room and then threw himself into the hammock for a rest.

"If brothers Frank and George* only knew I was in this scrape they'd quickly get me out.

"This old adobe shanty wouldn't stand long with me in danger inside and they outside to rescue me.

"But they are far away, and I've got to depend upon Billy Powell only to help Billy Powell, for I fear Terror Tom, good old soul, will never know where I am, and if he did know, he could do no good here.

"Well, luck is against me just now, but it may turn out all right, and I may discover just what I wanted to find.

"Who knows?"

And with this query Billy Blue-Eyes dismissed all despondency from him, for he was one to take matters as they came, young as he was.

The night came and Billy slept through it, and arose fully ready for the breakfast brought to him by a peon slave.

"Say, peon, has the chief skipped over the river yet?" he asked, lightly.

"What river, senor?" asked the peon.

"The Great River, of course."

"The Rio Grande, senor?"

"No, the River of Death."

"I do not understand the senor."

"Is El Bravo dead?"

The peon understood this, but made no reply, and left the guard-room.

"Well, he's no gossip, that's certain," said Billy Blue-Eyes, and he devoted himself to the really tempting breakfast before him.

He knew that a guard was stationed opposite to his iron door, though he could not see him; but him he would not ask about the chief.

Suddenly the key turned in the lock, the heavy door swung open, and the Boy Bugler entered.

"Good-morning, Senor Bonita, and allow me to thank you for saving my life yesterday before I forget it," said Billy Blue-Eyes, in his off-hand way.

"I deserve no thanks, senor, for I merely prevented a wrong; but I have come to have a talk with you," was the reply.

Billy threw himself into his hammock and said lightly:

"Be seated, senor."

But Bonita remained standing and remarked:

"I have come to tell you of the chief."

"Ah, yes; has he passed in his chips, or no?"

"You aimed well, senor."

"I fired quickly and sent my bullet for his heart, but judge I aimed a trifle high."

"You did, for the bullet missed his heart, though it gave him a most dangerous wound, and even yet he may die from it."

"What a pity."

"You say this, senor?"

"Yes, for I wish him to live to be hanged."

"You hate the Senor El Bravo bitterly, then?"

"Oh, no; I only know him to be a black-hearted scoundrel, who well deserves hanging for his crimes; but I am glad I did not kill him, as I was seeking his capture to force from him a secret which he alone can tell."

"And that secret, senor?" asked Bonita, quickly.

"It would not interest you, senor; but if El Bravo gets better I would like to see him."

"You shall; but he has only spoken a few words and now believes both you and Gonzalez to be dead, and I would not tell him otherwise, as his rage might cost him his life.

"But now I have come to ask you if you will not purchase your freedom?"

"What do you mean, Senor Bonita?"

"You hold a secret the chief wishes to know."

"Name it."

"You know of the existence of a mine in a certain range of mountains?"

"Granted."

"Will you guide the chief and an escort there, when he is able to travel, if he will set you free upon your arrival there?"

"I will not."

"You certainly wish to live?"

"I certainly do not want to die, senor."

"But you love gold better than life?"

"No, sir."

"Then why not purchase your liberty with the secret?"

"I will not."

"But I will tell you frankly that I have been trying to find out a certain secret for a long time, Senor Bonita.

"I am naturally a wanderer, and love the prairies and mountains more than all else.

"My life, short as it has been, has been one of adventure, and though I could now be living in peace and comfort on a cattle-ranch, with my mother and two brothers, I prefer to lead a career of danger, and some time ago pledged myself to one whom I esteem greatly, and who saved me from death, that I would solve a certain mystery for him.

"It has taken me a long time, but I have enjoyed the work, and at last have discovered, I think, that El Bravo can tell me what I wish to know."

"El Bravo?"

"Yes."

"I may be mistaken, as I have not seen his face; but I believe he is the man I am in search of."

"Will you tell me why you seek him?"

"I will not, Senor Bonita."

Bonita looked troubled, and for a moment was silent.

Then he said:

"Senor, I led the chief, as I told you, to believe that both you and Gonzalez were killed by the band after his fall.

"The truth he must know, as soon as he recovers sufficiently to hear all, and—"

"I am listening, senor," said Billy Blue Eyes, as Bonita paused.

"Well, I was in hopes that I could save your life."

"You did do so."

"I mean that I do not wish El Bravo to kill you."

"And you think he will?"

"I know that he will, when he knows you are here."

"I must take the chances," was the reckless reply of the young prisoner.

"That I do not wish you to do."

"It cannot be avoided."

"It can, if you pledge yourself to divulge the secret of where lies that mine.

"Why I will go with you myself, for the chief has a good nurse in his Mexican doctor, and I can return to guide him there, when he is able to ride, and will set you free."

"But I refuse, Senor Bonita."

"Then I cannot save you."

"So be it, I will take the chances, as I said."

"There are no chances, for it is a certainty that he will kill you."

"Death is the only certainty in this life, Senor Bonita; but just now I am in excellent health."

"You cannot escape from here, senor."

"Perhaps not," and Billy smiled, while the Bugler left the guard-room with the remark in a sad tone:

"Well, I will do all I can for your comfort, as long as I have the power; but it is terribly like dressing one up for the grave."

Billy laughed and the door closed behind the young Bandit Bugler.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FRIEND AMONG FOES.

THE next day, as Billy Blue-Eyes sat in his lonely den, a white object suddenly came flying through one of the narrow apertures, that served as a window and fell upon the dirt flooring near his feet.

Instantly he picked it up and discovered it to be a piece of paper wrapped around a bullet.

Unrolling it, he read, written in a bold hand and in Spanish:

"SENOR:—

Pressure has been brought upon the Senor Bonita to relieve me from being your guard, for fear I might aid your escape.

"Others, therefore, are placed over you; but do not despair, for you have a friend among your foes, and one who will not desert you."

"It is that really noble fellow, Gonzalez, who has written this," said Billy, and he proceeded to destroy the note by chewing it up fine.

The next morning, just after he had eaten his breakfast, another little white ball came flying into his room.

"Hullo! another note from Gonzalez."

"Guess he's got some plan formed to get me

out of this, and I am not a bit sorry," and he unwrapped the paper from the bullet.

Then he read, written in the same hand as was the other secret missive:

"Ask the peon who brings you your meals to request Senor Bonita to allow you to see a priest."

"There has one come into the retreat, and you can see him; but do not let the peon know that you are aware a padre is in camp."

"GONZALEZ."

"Now, what do I want to see a priest for?" said Billy Blue-Eyes, when he had read and destroyed this note.

"Anyhow, I'll do as Gonzalez says, for it may be a little game of his."

And when the peon servant came with his dinner Billy Blue-Eyes said:

"Say, pard Injun, I'm awfully wicked, if you did but know it, and I want you to ask the Senor Bonita if I could see a padre, if he has such a comfort in his robber retreat."

"There is a padre here, senor, but only one pausing by the way," answered the peon.

"Well, he'll pause here a long time if he stops to hear all the confessions of El Bravo's gang."

"Your devilish chief could detain him a year alone, and then skip all of his little sins, such as lying."

"The Senor Chief El Bravo is a good man," returned the peon, who was evidently an admirer of the bandit leader.

"And you are a good liar to say so; but never mind, you ask the Senor Bonita if I can see a padre."

The peon left the guard-room and soon after returned to say:

"The Senor Bonita says he will send a padre to confess the Senor Blue Eyes, as soon as he has heard the confessions of some of the wounded men."

"All right, tell the pirates to cut their stories short, for I'm just dying to tell how wicked I am," said Billy in a light tone, but, when the iron door closed behind the peon, he said seriously:

"Now what on earth can I say to this padre?"

"Ah yes, I'll give him one of the gold onzas those rascals that searched me did not find, and that will tickle him, after all the horrors he has had to listen to from the gang of cutthroats."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PADRE VISITS BILLY BLUE EYES.

SOME little time after the departure of the peon, the iron door of the adobe prison pen again swung open, and this time to admit a man in priestly garb.

"Here he is," muttered Billy Blue-Eyes to himself.

But he sprang lightly from his hammock, his favorite lounging place, and extended his manacled hands to welcome the padre, for he was kept ironed except when at his meals, and then the peon stood by him to watch his every movement.

"I am glad to see you, father," said Billy, addressing the visitor in Spanish, and he added politely:

"Be seated, sir, and I will rest here," and he sat on his hammock as though in a swing.

"*Miserere nostri, Domine, miserere nostri,*" said the padre solemnly.

Billy spoke Spanish well, was a good English scholar, and could talk Comanche and several other Indian tongues; but he was not up in Latin and said frankly:

"I have to pass on Latin, padre."

"*Salutem ex inimicis nostris, et de manu omnium qui oderunt nos,*" came the rejoinder in a dismal tone.

"I do not understand you, senor padre," said Billy.

"I'm durned ef I understand it myself, Beely; but ther old 'ooman Parnt me heaps o' Latin, an' I hes been slingin' it et ther cusses heur putty lively, I'll sw'ar."

"Terror Tom!" gasped Billy Blue-Eyes.

"That same, Beely boy."

"And a priest?"

"A howlin' old sinner o' a he wolf in ther wool o' a lamb, leetle pard."

Billy grasped the rough, but honest hand of the old Texan with a grip that made him wince and say:

"Yer hes ther grip o' a panther's jaw, pard, in that delikit hand o' yours."

"Well, Terror Tom, this beats all, and I do confess—"

"Don't do it, pard! don't do it!"

"Don't do what, old pard?"

"Confess."

Billy laughed, and said:

"I confess to a complete set-back in seeing you, was what I intended saying."

* Dr. Frank Powell, now a resident physician of Lacrosse, and known as "Fancy Frank," "White Beaver" and "Mighty Medicine" chief of the Winnebagoes, and George Powell, M. D., also a famous borderman, and known as "Night-Hawk George" and "The Texas Night Hawk."—THE AUTHOR.

"Lordy! I was afeerd yer were goin' ter confess yer sins ter me, an' I hev heard more diviltry talked inter my ears than I kin git over ef I live ontill Jedgment."

"In course I talked Latin to 'em, an' they thought I were forgivin' 'em; but they is whole-souled liars, fer I were cursin' 'em in my mind all ther same."

"But how did you get here, Terror Tom?"

"Comed here."

"That I know: but you left me to go and get files to cut off my irons with."

"I got 'em."

"You did?"

"I did, an' I has 'em right heur, an' they hain't ther on'y things I hes about me that are of service," and Terror Tom drew aside his robe and showed his belt bristling with arms.

"Well, Tom, you are a terror," said the youth.

"I know I is, an' I'm gittin' more so as I nighs ther grave."

"But here is ther files, pard, an' yer kin work 'em on ther irons, fer ter-night I thinks it are wiser fer yer ter git."

"I am ready when you are, Terror Tom; but tell me how you got here in that rig?" said Billy Blue-Eyes.

"Don't it fit?"

"It does."

"Don't I look ther cheese?"

"What cheese, Tom?" asked Billy, who had not heard the slang Tom used.

"Don't I look ther padre?"

"You most certainly do."

"Waal, I caught a gerloot in this heur rig who were layin' fer me, havin' recognized me as who I am, or was, afore I puts this on."

"Waal, he hed me sure; but he were too trustful o' Terror Tom's human natur', an' I jist tarded ther tables on him."

"He hed two pards waitin' fer him, an' I jist parsonates the padre, an' played him fer me, an' went fer them same gerloots."

"Captured them?"

"Yas; got 'em fer specimens fer ther bone-yard mooseum, yer see."

"I tuk my priz'ner then, an' ther three horses, an' lit out fer ther chapel, ter find yer gone."

"Thar I los' my Greaser, fer ther tree I hed hitched him an' his horse to, slid into ther water an' swummed away down ther Rio Grande."

"Next day I comed heur, an' leavin' my horse in ther hills, jist scraped off my thorns an' put on this rig, an' heur I are, Pard Beely."

"And I am glad to see you, Terror Tom; but you run great risks."

"Nary, fer these fellers look upon a padre as far above 'em, an' I hes hed all attention."

"I seen a gerloot slingin' a bullet with a paper on it inter your cell, an' I kinder thought he were friendly, so I calls on him ter confess."

"He tells me ther whole story, an' I jist up an' lets him know I'd help yer, so we hes it fixt, fer yer goes with him ter night."

"He'll fix ther horses fer yer both."

"And you, Terror Tom?"

"Waal, I stays a day or so, as it mout make things look suspesbus ef I went too, an' Padre Toma'o, as is my name, wants ter be friendly an' find out all he can fer futur' work."

"You are perhaps right, Tom, but I don't want you to be found out."

"No; that would be durned bad fer me; but I shell remain, while you an' ther Greaser make fer ther Devil's Ranch an' wait thar fer me, fer ther chief are down on his back, an' no one else are goin' thar ter s'arch fer yer."

"But priests sometimes come here, Tom."

"Let 'em come."

"But they will know you are not one of the brotherhood."

"How'll they know it, pard?" asked Terror Tom, with great confidence in his own powers to play padre.

"Your Spanish isn't the best, and—"

"I'll tell 'em my mother were a Frenchman."

Billy Blue Eyes laughed as heartily at this as though he was in no danger whatever.

Then he said:

"But your grammar, Terror Tom, is—"

"What's my grandma got ter do with it, boy?"

Again Billy Blue-Eyes laughed and said:

"But what will you say to a priest if he happened here?"

"I'll talk Latin to him until I make him sick, Pard Beely."

"Oh, I'll fix him, ontill he thinks he knows nuthin' an' I are a bishop."

"Don't you mind me, but skip this night, 'an I'll fine yer within two days."

Then stepping to the door and knocking for it

to be opened, he continued aloud as the guard appeared:

"Ora pro nobis, my son," and he raised his far-from-priestly hand up as though in a blessing and disappeared, just as the peon came with the prisoner's meal, which consisted of *chile con carne*,* beans and *tortillas*,† coffee most fragrant and *caso*.‡

With great relish Billy Blue-Eyes ate, for the expected work for the night added zest to his always good appetite.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FLIGHT.

In spite of his anxiety about the night that was coming on, Billy Blue-Eyes was perfectly cool, and, as soon as his supper had been removed, set to work to file off the irons upon his wrists.

It was tedious work, but he stuck to it untiringly, and at last felt his good right hand free, for with both manacled, it was hard to use the file.

The left soon after followed, and Billy arose from his seat feeling already like a free man.

Now and then he could hear a boisterous shout or general laugh, with the tinkling of a guitar, and a voice in song, coming from the quarters of the men.

And without he could hear the occasional movement of his guard, for a Mexican is too lazy, as a general thing, to pace a beat when on duty.

Suddenly the clear notes of Bonita's bugle were heard, blowing "Lights out and to bed!" for El Bravo kept military discipline in his camp, and would not allow his men to sit up all night gambling and carousing, so as to unfit them for service.

It was ten o'clock, Billy Blue-Eyes knew by this, and he had just gotten free of his irons.

Then he threw himself into his hammock and was soon fast asleep.

But he started to his feet, for there came a heavy blow against his iron door, and it was followed by a groan.

Then the door swung back and a form entered.

"Quien es?"§ asked Billy.

"Gonzalez, senior; come, for we must be off," was the low reply, as he threw the youth a cloak and Mexican hat, such as the bandits wore.

"Then we can escape?" asked Billy, quietly.

"Yes, senior, for all is quiet, and we have only the guard at the pass to overcome."

"Here are your arms, which I got for you from the chief's armory."

He handed Billy his own rifle and belt of arms as he spoke.

"Now I am myself, good Gonzalez," said Billy with pleasure in his voice and manner, and he followed the Mexican out of the door of his prison.

"Ha! who is that?" he asked as his eyes fell upon a dark form lying upon the ground.

"The guard, senior," was the cool reply.

"Dead?"

"Yes, senior."

"You killed him?"

"I did, senior, for he was my foe, and it gave me joy to drive my *cuchilla*‡ to his heart."

"Come on, senior!"

Billy Blue-Eyes made no reply, but followed his leader in silence.

They crossed the plaza, went to the wall, and there Billy found another dark form lying upon the ground.

He asked no question, and Gonzalez said simply:

"It is, Chica, senior, and he too was my foe."

"My *cuchilla* did the work for him, and there is one other."

"One other what?"

"To die."

"Ah! three lives, Gonzalez, to effect my escape?"

"Would there were more, senior, for your life is worth many such as serve El Bravo."

"Come, our horses await us there in the mesquites."

He pointed to a clump of trees not far off, and thither they wended their way.

There, in the shadow, stood three horses, two saddled and bridled, the third bearing a pack-saddle.

"My splendid Jet," cried Billy, as he recog-

* Meat seasoned with red pepper.

† Mexican flap-jacks, or cakes.

‡ A cheese made from goats' milk, and which is a favorite in every Mexican household.

§ Who is it?

|| Knife.

nized his own black mustang, and Jet gave a low whinny of welcome.

"Sh—Jet, you mustn't be too glad, and spoil all."

"*Mucha gracias*,* Gonzalez, for this last kindness to me."

"I owe you more than I can repay, senior."

"But, see, I borrowed El Bravo's pet horse," and he patted the splendid animal as he spoke.

"Then we shall be superbly mounted, Gonzalez."

"Yes, senior, and well prepared for a long ride, or stay in the chaparrals, as you please, for I leave my comrades behind me now, and follow your lead."

"You do well, good Gonzalez."

"See, here I have a pack-horse, with provisions and all we shall need; but let us press on now, as it is but a few hours to daybreak."

He led the way toward the pass, asking Billy Blue Eyes to lead the pack-horse, and they rode along at a lively pace.

Soon they entered the pass, and the guard there, with the narrow escape of Gonzalez a few days before as a warning, sprung toward them.

"Ah, Gonzalez, it is you?" he said, recognizing the horseman in advance.

"Yes, Valdos, it is Gonzalez, and I come for a word in your private ear."

"Come closer, please."

The unsuspecting Mexican stepped close up to the other, and instantly gave a startled cry, as his throat was seized in a grip that crushed it, and a knife sunk deep down into his heart.

Throwing the dying man from him, he fell heavily to the ground, while Gonzalez turned to Billy Blue-Eyes, and said in a low, hoarse tone:

"Senior, the three most merciless cut-throats of El Bravo's band have died this night, and by my hand."

"Through them my brother and myself were ruined, and then forced to fly to the chaparrals for safety, and I have avenged the wrongs they did us, and now turn my back forever upon the past."

"Now, senior, I will lead that horse, and we will hasten from this hated spot."

Billy Blue-Eyes silently relinquished the lariat he held of the led horse, and they started off at a rapid gallop.

But Billy Blue-Eyes was ill at ease because Terror Tom was left behind, disguised as he was, and made the mental resolve to return to the bandits' retreat after him, should he not come to the Devil's Ranch within the promised time.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GONZALEZ HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

It was not without some trouble that Billy Blue Eyes got Gonzalez, the Mexican, to accompany him to the Devil's Ranch.

Although above the ordinary class of his race, Gonzalez, as with nearly all of them, was superstitious, and he needed a great deal of coaxing before he would follow the youth to the old chapel, which had such a bad name on the western shore of the Rio Grande, and was also dreaded by Texans alike, we may add.

"You stayed there all night, you say, senior?" he asked, as they turned up under the bank of the river to seek the dread place.

"Yes, and would have been there yet, I suppose, had not El Bravo had the nerve to come there."

"But you were not alone?"

"No; I had a comrade."

"Where is he now, senior?" asked Gonzalez, who did not know the pretended Padre Tomaso as other than he represented himself to be.

"He went to secure files to cut my irons off, and before his return El Bravo came."

"It was the Diablo Texan we call Terror Tom, for he alone could have rescued you."

"Yes, it was Terror Tom."

"Then, if he is there now, he will not feel friendly toward me, senior, for he has sworn to kill all of the Chaparral Pirates he can."

"As my friend, he will treat you well; but see, here we turn into the water-wash, and soon we will be at the chapel."

It was just dawn as the two rode up to Terror Tom's fence at the head of the wash, and Gonzalez was most glad that it was, for he would have been most unwilling to have gone there in the darkness.

The horses were seen feeding quietly near, and there was no evidence that the old ruin held a single occupant, so they dismounted, turned their horses loose, and soon made themselves

* Many thanks.

most comfortable with the aid of the contents of the pack-saddle, which the thoughtfulness of the Mexican had procured.

As Billy Blue-Eyes and the Mexican sat in the large room that night after a substantial supper, the latter suddenly asked:

"Senor, do you know who El Bravo really is?"

"Why do you ask, Gonzalez?"

"Well, senor, you seem to feel a grudge against him, rather than the rest of us, and I did not know but that he had personally wronged you, as he has the Texan, Terror Tom."

"Do you know who he is, Gonzalez?" asked Billy Blue-Eyes.

"I do, senor."

"Is he a Mexican?"

"No, senor."

"A Texan?"

"An Americano, senor."

"Do you know his name?"

"I do, senor."

"Will you tell me it?"

"Yes, senor, for I have cut loose from all the past now, and if I can help you I will."

"Then tell me the name of El Bravo."

"In *El Bravo* you almost have it, for it is Elgin Bravort."

"By Jonah's whale!" almost shouted Billy Blue-Eyes, and the startled Mexican cried hastily:

"What is it, senor?"

"Simply that I am perfectly right in believing El Bravo the man I have so long sought."

"Tell me what you know of him, Gonzalez," quickly said Billy Blue-Eyes.

"Well, senor, I have known him for long years, and it was when he was sorely wounded and I nursed him though it, and heard all he said, as he raved in delirium, that I found out about him, and this is why I felt hurt, and thought it strange that he should not spare me, senor, when my leaving my post to see my brother die was my first offense," and the voice of the Mexican trembled.

"But what do you know of him, Gonzalez?"

"He was a ranchero of Texas, senor, with mining interests, too, in New Mexico."

"It seems he had fled from the upper States from having committed some crime, and his brother, deeply attached to him, had followed him to Texas, and with riches, had started him well in the cattle business."

"But there were army officers who recognized him, and he had to leave Texas it was said to escape arrest, and he came to Mexico."

"He tried to make his brother follow him, but he had behaved so badly toward him that he would not do so; especially as he had a pleasant home, and a wife and little child to make him happy."

"Seeing his brother happy made the chief hate him, and he secretly crossed the Rio Grande one night with a number of men, for he was then the leader of a band of robbers, and leaving them in the chaparral went on to his brother's house."

"I accompanied him, for he had saved my life once, and he knew I was faithful."

"Taking off his mask before he reached the house, I for the first time saw his face, senor."

"Why does he wear that mask, Gonzalez?"

"So that no one can ever recognize him if he is captured as El Bravo the bandit, senor."

"He is cunning; but continue your story please."

"He received a welcome from his brother, but a cold one from the wife, and he introduced me as a Mexican friend of his."

"We were, of course, invited to remain all night, and retired to our rooms."

"But that night our comrades, by the chief's orders, quietly surrounded the house, and in the disguise of United States soldiers seized El Bravo and myself and carried us off, and along with us the little child of the chief's brother."

"The poor father and mother were bound, and with their servants left in their home; but released the next day went to the fort to see what the outrage meant."

"But the commanding officer of course knew nothing of the affair, and all attempts to solve the mystery failed."

"The poor mother died of a broken heart, and what became of the father of the child I never knew, but I did know that he sought this revenge because he had loved the lady, his brother's wife, and she had treated him with scorn."

"But, Gonzalez, what became of the child?"

"She—"

"It was a little girl then?"

"Yes, senor, a lovely child of eight years, when she was stolen by her uncle."

"He did not kill her?"

"Oh no, senor, he of course led her to believe that he was a captive too, and by degrees won her love and confidence."

"After a few years she seemed to forget the past, and to love her wicked uncle only."

"She dwelt at a hacienda where he spent much of his time, and he led her to believe that he was outlawed for no crime, and like Cortina, was driven to bandit warfare by the force of cruel circumstances."

"A bold spirited girl, trained to be a perfect rider and dead shot, she sought to go with him on his many red trails, and one day she came to the stronghold with him, and since then has been known as Bonita, the Bugler."

"By Daniel's Den of Lions! I half believed it: but the Bugler has a mustache."

"It is a false one, senor."

"She deceived the band, who all believe her to be a boy; but I knew her the moment I saw her as the little Nita Bravort the chief had stolen from his brother."

Billy Blue-Eyes sprang to his feet and paced the room in an excited manner.

At last he turned to the Mexican and said:

"Gonzalez, you have made your fortune by the story you have told this night, and I will tell you why."

"Some two years ago I was severely wounded and captured by Indians, and death would have been my fate."

"But a *Haciendero* at whose ranch I had stopped for the night, hearing the firing shortly after I left his house, for I tried to die game, came after me, saw the red-skins bearing me off, got a few of his cowboys and followed:

"He pressed them hard, brought them to bay, beat them off and recaptured me, killing the chief just as he had my scalp-lock twisted about his hand to cut it off."

He took me back to his home, where he and his wife nursed me back to health."

"That man was Sequin Bravort, and his wife is not dead, as you supposed, but alive and well, though they both bitterly mourn for their lost child."

"They told me their story, and I pledged my word to find her."

"I hunted long on the lower Rio Grande without success; but from various circumstances I was led to believe that El Bravo was Elgin Bravort."

"I gave out that I knew of a gold mine in the mountains, thinking he would capture me, and thus I would be able to get to his stronghold and see if I was right in my conjecture."

"I know of a mine in the mountains, with stuff that looks like gold; but I had it tested, and it proved not to be of value."

"But I intended taking him there, on condition he would give up the girl, if she was yet alive, and before he could find out how I had fooled him, I would be safe."

"Now you know my plot, and having through you, discovered the object of my search, we must get the maiden into our power, and I will carry her to her parents."

"But how to do it, senor," was the remark of the Mexican, and it was evident that both of them were in a quandary upon this subject.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BILLY'S PLOT.

THE following morning Billy Blue-Eyes announced to his Mexican comrade that he had decided what was best to be done in the matter; but that he would await the coming of the Padre Tomaso before divulging what it should be.

"Is the padre coming here, senor?" asked Gonzalez.

"Yes; I expect him toward the afternoon, and I am confident he can give us some assistance."

"Yes, senor, for these padres have wise heads and good hearts."

"That one has, I know," answered Billy.

"Padre Tomaso seems not to be Mexican, senor, for his Spanish is very impure."

"Yes, Gonzalez, I noticed that myself," returned the youth with a smile.

And just at noon up rode the pretended padre, and he saluted Billy in a way that made Gonzalez turn pale with wonder.

"Hello, Beely, my boy pard, I'm as glad ter see yer as though I'd run a nail in my foot."

"Bully fer you an' bully fer me, an' bully fer thet skeert-lookin' Greaser thar, whose heart is in ther right place ef he are a Mex."

"I might as well tell you now, Gonzalez, that the pretended Padre Tomaso is none other than Texas Terror Tom."

"*Santissima!*"

The ejaculation broke from the Mexican's lips, and he dropped his hand upon his revolver as though to defend himself.

"Hold on thar, pard, fer we is ter act squar' on this racket, an' I gives yer my clutch."

"Thar it are, an' I means it."

And Terror Tom held forth his hand to the Mexican, who grasped it warmly.

Then the three entered the mine, and Billy Blue-Eyes told Terror Tom all he knew about El Bravo and the Bandit Bugler, and continued:

"Now, Tom, my plot is for you to take one of the horses of the three men who attempted to capture you, and return to the Hacienda and try all in your power to get the Bandit Bugler—as the maiden is called—to accompany you to some ranch near, and once free from the place, bring her here, willingly if she will come, forcibly if you must."

"And you, Pard Beely, and our reformed friend, Greaser Gonzalez, heur?"

"I shall at once go to the fort, report to the commanding officer, and ask for a squadron of cavalry."

"We can dash across the river at dark, ride hard to the Hacienda, and Gonzalez going ahead can open the way by disposing of the guards at the Pass and the wall gate—can you not, Gonzalez?"

"Easily, senor."

"Then El Bravo's Hacienda is ours, and he is our prisoner."

"That are a prime arrangement, Pard Beely, but it leaves me out o' ther skrimmage."

"The attack, you mean."

"Yas, pard, an' I hes ter be thar."

"Well, can you propose a better plan?"

"Yas."

"That I go?"

"No, yer don't, fer yer escape jist raised 'tar-nal thunder, an' ef you an' Gonzalez were tuk, they'd make it interestin' fer yer, I kin sw'ar."

"Well, what do you propose, old man?" asked Billy.

"I purposes thet yer git ther sogers an' start at onst fer 'em."

"Yer kin git back by ter-morrer night at dark, and Mex heur an' me will jine yer at ther crossin'."

"Then we'll skip fer ther Haciendy, an' I'll go on ahead playin' padre, knock ther lights out o' ther guard at ther pass an' ther wall *puerte** and jist call in quiet on ther chief an' ther Boy Boogler, or rather ther gal."

"I'll git Boogler inter ther room I hed when I were thar, an' jist make her pris'ner an' lock her in thar, an' as fer El Bravo, he hain't able ter move, so we can git him serene."

"Then I kin come down ter ther *puerte* an' meet you, Pard Beely, an' ther boys kin sail in an' do ther biz."

This was decided upon as the best plan, for Billy Blue-Eyes was most anxious to prevent Bonita from being seen by the soldiers, and he knew if the place was attacked she would defend it with her life, and he wished to keep secret the part she had played in the bandit camp.

Mounting Jet, he started at a swift pace for the fort, arrived there without adventure, and after telling his story, for he was well known to the commandant, he was, half an hour after his arrival, on his way back to the Rio Grande, with a squadron of cavalry.

They rode hard, and reached the crossing just after dark, and there they were met by Terror Tom in his priestly robe and hat, and Gonzalez, who was quite nervous at meeting those whom he had so long fought, and who had set a price upon his head as one of El Bravo's men.

But Billy told the officer in command that he was his friend, never speaking of the Mexican's past life, and the cavalry set off on Mexican territory to attack El Bravo in his stronghold.

THE PLAN OF TERROR TOM.

THE plan of Terror Tom was carried out with such success, that Bonita was made a prisoner by the supposed padre. El Bravo was locked in his room, and Billy Blue-Eyes had led the soldiers into the stronghold before their presence was known by the startled Chaparral Pirates.

Then began a savage fight, but surprised as they were, the bandits were driven back at all points, and in less than half an hour the Hacienda was in the possession of the United States troops, who quickly seized upon the prisoners and booty.

As soon as he saw that the troopers held possession of the Hacienda, Billy Blue-Eyes called

* Entrance.

to Terror Tom, who had cast aside his priestly garb, and added to his death-list in the fight, and to Gonzalez, to follow him, and they made for the wing in the structure, where they knew El Bravo lay, too severely wounded to rise from his bed, and where Bonita was confined.

First they went to the room of the chief, and Terror Tom, who had locked the door behind him, quickly threw it open.

As they entered they were met with a shot, and a bullet imbedded itself in the door.

It came from the wounded chief, who now, with no mark upon his face, had risen, seized a revolver, and faced them, though he swayed to and fro with weakness.

"Surrender, El Bravo!" cried Billy Blue-Eyes, springing toward him.

The chief saw who it was, by the light of the candles in the tin sconce on the wall, and he uttered a wild cry, and started back, for he had believed Billy to be dead.

And that cry was his last, for he tottered and fell heavily upon the floor a dead man, the great exertion he had made having reopened his wound, and cost him his life.

"He is dead!"

"Now for the room of Bonita," cried Billy Blue-Eyes, and Terror Tom led the way thither.

This door was also unlocked by the Texan, and within they beheld the disguised maiden.

She was bound as Terror Tom had left her, and her handsome eyes flashed upon the intruders fiercely.

"Tom, I will speak to her," said Billy Blue-Eyes, and advancing toward her he said, as he doffed his sombrero:

"Pardon me, Senorita Bonita, if I tell you that I know your sex."

She flushed crimson, started visibly and hung her head.

"I know," continued Billy, "that El Bravo is your uncle, and that he has reared you to be what you are; that he stole you from your good parents long years ago to avenge himself on them, and I have come to take you back to your father and mother, who so long have mourned your loss."

"Do you tell the truth, senor?" asked the girl almost savagely.

"I do, as Terror Tom here, who is the pretended Padre Tomaso, and Gonzalez, who was with your wicked uncle, Elgin Bravort, when he kidnapped you from your home, can testify."

"To save you and not let the troops who came here with us, know who you are, or your history, Terror Tom bound you and left you here, and I beg you now to go willingly with us from here."

"Where?"

"To your parents' home."

"If I refuse?"

"Then I shall take you to them by force, for I have been searching for you a long time, and once with them, you will soon know the truth, recall the scenes of your childhood and be happy."

She seemed now to be very nervous, and asked:

"What of El Bravo?"

"He is dead, senorita."

"Dead?"

"Yes, senorita, he arose from his bed to face us, and the exertion killed him."

She dropped her head an instant, brushed her hand across her eyes, and said in a low tone:

"I am utterly bewildered."

"Decide at once, senorita, to go willingly, for the soldiers are searching the *jacal* now."

"I will go," she said in a dazed kind of way, and instantly Billy Blue Eyes cried:

"Quick! gather what you wish to carry with you and come."

She obeyed in silence and passed out of the door with the youth, where they were joined by Terror Tom and Gonzalez.

"Quick, Tom, go to the major and tell him that I have gone off on a trail of my own, and you guide them back to the river crossing, and then join us at the Devil's Ranch," cried Billy, and he moved away in the darkness with Bonita and Gonzalez, while the Texan went to make his report to the officer in command.

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

BACK to the Rio Grande crossing Terror Tom guided the gallant troopers, and though weighted down with their dead, wounded, prisoners and booty, they recrossed to American soil, while the darkness yet covered their retreat from the curious eyes of any prowling Mexican.

Having seen the rear-guard enter the stream, Terror Tom wended his way to the old ruined

chapel, and found there Billy Blue-Eyes, Bonita and Gonzalez.

It was decided that they had better at once cross the river, as the Mexican troops might be aroused by the invasion of their territory by American soldiers, even in a good cause, and thus be tempted to search the ruin.

Instantly they got ready, and the sun was rising when they crossed the river and felt that they were comparatively safe.

Not caring to follow the trail of the soldiers, they struck off for themselves, and after a long and dangerous journey, meeting with numerous adventures, they arrived at Bravort Ranch, Billy Blue-Eyes having gone on ahead to acquaint the father and mother that he had kept his promise and brought back their daughter to them.

No pen can describe the meeting, and happy with her parents, I will leave the beautiful Nita no longer in the garb of the Bandit Bugler.

As for Gonzalez, he was made cowboy chief of Mr. Bravort's Ranch, and Terror Tom having avenged the past upon the Pirates of the Chaparral, turned his attention to scouting for the Government, and is still a dweller upon the flower-bespangled prairies of the Lone Star State, while my hero, Billy Blue-Eyes, now grown to man's estate, has at last given up his wild life on the border, and become a popular "Medicine Man" in a western city.

THE END.

Half-Dime Singer's Library

- 1 WHOA, EYMA! and 59 other Songs.
- 2 CAPTAIN CUFF and 57 other Songs.
- 3 THE GAINESBORO' HAT and 62 other Songs.
- 4 JOHNNY MORGAN and 60 other Songs.
- 5 I'LL STRIKE YOU WITH A FEATHER and 62 others.
- 6 GEORGE THE CHARMER and 56 other Songs.
- 7 THE BELLE OF ROCKAWAY and 52 other Songs.
- 8 YOUNG FELLAH, YOU'RE TOO FRESH and 60 others.
- 9 SHY YOUNG GIRL and 65 other Songs.
- 10 I'M THE GOVERNOR'S ONLY SON and 58 other Songs.
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